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CENTRE FOR GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Centre for Global Higher Education working paper series

From government control to increased transparency? Changes to quality assurance of higher education in Japan and China

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Working paper no. 29
November 2017

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND hefce

Published by the Centre for Global Higher Education,
UCL Institute of Education, London WC1H 0AL

www.researchcghe.org

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ISSN 2398-564X

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The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is gratefully acknowledged.

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, in addition to national classifications of higher education, and government reports or national-level projects, more diverse transparency tools of higher education have emerged in Japan and China. They include university ranking systems developed by media and companies, as well as evaluation by researchers and third-parties. Nowadays the purpose of transparency of higher education does not merely cater to government demands as it used to prior to the 1980s. It has aimed to benefit a wide range of users, including students, their parents, individual higher education institutions, faculty members, administrators, graduates, workplaces, industry, and the public. In a major sense, there has been a transformation from government control to increased transparency in relation to quality assurance of higher education, in both countries.

Introduction

Like many other East Asian countries, modern higher education in both Japan and China was established by the countries' national governments based on western ideas and especially French and German patterns in the late 19th century. The remarkable characteristics of higher education in Japan and China include: higher education systems which are rigidly regulated and controlled by the central government; and the expectation they will produce graduates and undertake research for the service of national governments and social development. Since the early 1990s, tremendous changes have occurred in the landscape of higher education in East Asian higher education systems, including in both Japan and China. One of these changes is the emergence of national frameworks of quality assurance (QA) of higher education and an increasing emphasis on transparency in higher education. Compared to major transparency tools being utilised in European countries, both Japan and China established national-level classification systems of higher education when the modern higher education systems emerged. However, the main purpose of these systems is not for users such as students and their parents, industry or other stakeholders; they are basically employed as one means by the central governments to administer and control all higher education institutions. With growing impacts from internationalisation and marketisation of higher education since the 1990s, new forms of transparency tools have come into existence in both countries. Not only the central government but also individual scholars, media, and other organisations have created various transparency tools to meet diverse users' demands. Higher education in the two countries has become more open to scrutiny and increasingly transparent. Western ideas and practices have apparently shaped the current QA of higher education in the two countries, but both Japan and China have formed their own national QA systems of higher education, including transparency instruments over the past two decades. This is especially true of China. In a major sense, in recent years, both countries have developed more and diversified tools of increasing transparency of their higher education. Partly this is because the central governments have devoted more efforts to improving the transparency of national higher education through series of national reforms. Partly this is one of the most important influences from the market.

Previous studies have suggested that very limited research has been conducted on the relationship of transparency or accountability of higher education with existing schemes of QA of higher education in the two countries. Much less is known of what main instruments are used to seek or to enhance the transparency of higher education, and especially what effects transparency instruments have had on institutions and teaching and research activities, and students' learning outcomes. The purpose of this study is to discuss historic background and major characteristics of the transparency instruments of higher education in Japan and China based on the analysis of earlier studies, documentation, and relevant findings from national statistics. This study addresses two main research questions as follows:

1. What are main characteristic of transparency instruments of higher education in China and Japan?

2. How significantly can the current practices of transparency of both Japan and China be applied to other countries?

In relation to terminology, differing from the Europe Higher Education Area,[i] it appears that there are no generally-accepted definitions of transparency or equivalent phrases which are officially used in either Japan or China. In this study, the term transparency means any activities which are concerned with the disclosure of information on higher education to diverse users or stakeholders with a purpose of ensuring the data, activities and quality of higher education are more transparent and more easily understandable. Specifically speaking, they include main forms of national classifications of higher education institutions, national ranking systems, databases, and other tools with information on teaching and research activities, as well as governance and management matters of higher education institutions, are available for the public.

Historic heritages and recent changes

The formation of modern higher education systems in both Japan and China is primarily modelled on the ideas of higher education in European continental countries, especially the patterns of France and German in the late 19th century (Amano, 1989; Hayhoe, 1996).

Despite different forms and to different degrees, the central governments maintained direct and rigid control in determining the basic structure of higher education; its budgetary systems; the size of national higher education systems; and the quality of all higher education institutions in the two countries. The utmost important mission of both higher education systems is to produce professionals in law, engineering, science for the national governments and the modernisation of society.

Although numerous changes had occurred in higher education in the two countries since the end of the Second World War, by the end of the 1980s several similarities could still be found in higher education. For example, firstly, national governments imposed strong and direct regulation and control on all levels and types of higher education institutions, including the private and non-government sectors. Secondly, both countries formulated nationally unified standards of the establishment of new higher education institutions. The standards cover a wide range of aspects of higher education, including the size of a higher education institution, the ratio of faculty members to students, the provision of educational programmes, requirements for students' graduation and for conferring a degree, the composition of basic units of education and research activities, governance style, financial arrangements, and so forth. Finally, quality of higher education at a system level was essentially assured on the basis of national standards or equivalent regulations in a top-down way. Compared with many western countries, especially the USA, there was little demand for transparency in higher education from stakeholders such as students, industry, students' parents, etc.

Since the early 1990s, tremendous changes have occurred in higher education in the two countries. Similar changes can be identified at a national level as follows (Huang, forthcoming).

Firstly, both countries have introduced the phrase 'quality assurance', 'quality improvement' or equivalent terms in their higher education. Although usages and interpretations of these terms may vary depending upon different contexts, the issue concerning quality assurance and/or improvement has become one of the top priorities of higher education reforms at both the national and institutional levels. More importantly, in addition to original or traditional practices of assuring the quality of higher education mainly based on national standards of the establishment of

universities and colleges which was mentioned earlier, new agencies, centres or other organisations specifically designated for quality assurance in higher education have emerged. For example, China established its Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education in 2004, which has legal status. In actuality, however, it is part of the Ministry of Education because its leaders are directly appointed by the Ministry of Education and its major budgets also come from the central government. In 2000 the National Institute for Academic Degrees (NIAD) in Japan was reorganised as a new entity with a new name, the National Institute for Academic Degrees-University Evaluation (NIAD-UE). Since then it has administered the university evaluation in addition to its existing functions as a degree-awarding institution. Besides, more and more professional associations and third-party agencies, as well as other incorporated bodies have come into being in the two countries since the 2000s.

Secondly, despite the introduction of market mechanisms to higher education, the central governments of both China and Japan still maintain powerful leadership or exercise strong supervision over individual corporations and private institutions in terms of approving or closing a corporate entity. Although there are more options for universities and colleges to be evaluated by a public or a private quality assurance agency, including a third-party or an incorporated foundation, all these agencies or organisations in charge of external evaluation of individual universities and colleges are either directly founded by the government or required to be certified by the central government in advance.

Finally, the growing importance of external or third-party evaluation on universities and colleges and an increasingly strong request for more accountability and transparency of operating universities and colleges from various stakeholders does not necessarily mean a declining impact from the central government or local authorities on regulating and supervising individual universities and colleges, including private institutions and transnational higher education institutions. By developing national policies, allocating pubic revenues, and providing other competitive funding, it is likely that the central government or local authorities in East Asia still exert a decisive and apparent influence on key aspects of universities and colleges in a new form.

Transparency of Japanese higher education

As early as the late 19th century when Japan established its modern higher education systems, the central government made clear national classifications of higher education institutions by funder, educational level and type and other categories. According to the University Act and national regulations, the mission, functions, duties or responsibilities, financial issues, governance arrangement, basic structure of educational and research organisations, requirements for graduation, and other aspects of academic and administrative matters of each type and sector of higher education institutions were explicitly promulgated. However, the primary purpose of establishing the national classifications of higher education institutions was to ensure the central government and local authorities could monitor and control individual institutions based on relevant acts and national regulations. They were mainly utilised to serve the administration of the central government in relation to budget allocation, student admission, and other internal governance matters.

Since the end of the WWII, influenced by American ideas of higher education, Japan quickly moved from an elite to mass phase of higher education and then to near-universal access by the early 1990s, according to Trow's definition. Like many other countries, with a quantitative expansion of both higher education institutions and higher education enrolments, Japanese higher education structure has become increasingly diversified. During the process, the Japanese government has continuously revised and updated the national classifications of higher education in light of changes to higher education (MOE, 1992, 1993). For the benefit of international readers, a brief introduction to the current national classifications of higher education institutions is made below:

Contemporary Japanese higher education basically consists of three major types of institution: universities, junior colleges (*Tanki Daigaku* in Japanese) and colleges of technology[1]. In some cases, specialised training colleges (*Sensyuu Gakkou*)[2] are

[1] A higher education institution which offers a unified five-year education (five years six months for mercantile marine studies) aimed at nurturing technical experts. It requires graduation from lower secondary schools or equivalent academic ability for admission. A minimum of 167 credits are required for graduation (147 credits for mercantile marine studies). Graduates are awarded the title of Associate.

[2] A higher education institution which provides practical and technical learning and skills in a wide variety of disciplines such as the medical care, technology, culture and general education, business,

also considered part of higher education. In addition, the number of students officially enrolled in the Open University of Japan (changed from the University of Air in October 2007) and those pursuing their higher education learning through TV or radios in other regular universities and junior colleges are included in the data of Japan's post-secondary education as well.

Based on these broad classifications, distinctive features of Japanese higher education can be summarised as follows. Firstly, because the national and public sectors are mainly established, founded and administered by national government and local authorities respectively, while the private sector is established and operated by school corporations, these three different sectors are expected to play different roles and fulfill diverse functions. Especially, there is a clear division of labour between the national and private sectors. Except for a very few private universities with a long history, the vast majority of the private sector is involved in educational activities. In contrast, in addition to teaching activities, the national universities are more engaged in basic**,** applied, and large-scale scientific research. The local public sector, established and funded by local authorities, focuses on the production of graduates for regional economic development and engages in service activities for the local community. In contrast, the vast majority of private sector institutions are involved in educational activities in humanities and social sciences at undergraduate level. They provide more vocational and practical educational programmes. Moreover, as a huge amount of their revenue comes from tuition and fees, the operation and management of the private sector is more market-oriented than either the national or local public sector.

Secondly, Japan's private sector accounts for a large share of all institutions. For example, in 2016, the private junior colleagues and universities accounted for 95 per cent and 77.2 per cent of the total respectively. Moreover, the proportion of students in private universities and junior colleges comprises 73.5 percent and 94.7 percent of the total (MEXT, 2017).

Obviously, the present classifications of higher education institutions in Japan appear to be more compatible with the USA's national higher education schemes

personal care and nutrition, education and welfare, fashion and home science, agriculture and much more. Graduates are conferred with Certification.

and other systems modelled on US ideas. For example, the structure and function of junior colleges are roughly similar to the US community colleges. The Japanese four-year universities are equivalent to the US universities. Actually, even in terms of educational programmes and length of study, as well as graduation requirements at an undergraduate level, both countries share plenty of similarities.

As for ranking systems, the influence of major global university league tables – such as ARWU (Academic Ranking of World-Class Universities), QS University Rankings, THE (Times Higher Education) World University Rankings, US News Week – on the transparency of Japanese higher education is considerable and evident. All these rankings do not only list the world's best universities, but also provide information on Japanese universities which are ranked among them in terms of their teaching and research activities, international outlook, reputation and more. Their data helps governments and universities to locate the position of Japanese universities and even create strategies to upgrade the presence of their universities. Further, they are a vital resource for students and their parents, helping them choose where to study, and international students to determine which universities abroad they will choose. In a major sense, all these have greatly facilitated the transparency of Japanese higher education systems.

In addition to the global university ranking systems above, with growing impacts from the market on higher education institutions and influences from economic globalisation and internationalisation since the early 1990s, various domestic university ranking systems have been created in Japan. According to Yonezawa's study (2013), since the early 1990s, several rankings systems focusing on different aspects of higher education have emerged in Japan. Some rankings are produced from the perspective of students and their parents. For example, *Asahi University Rankings,* which is developed by a newspaper company, provides information on almost all important aspects of Japanese universities, from institutional academic performance to student life, by using approximately 80 indicators. *Yomiuri Shinbun*, the largest newspaper company in Japan, publishes its rankings of Japanese universities. Differing from *Asahi University Rankings,* it devotes more attention to the quality of education provision, teaching improvement, curriculum design, and has attracted the attention of universities and the general public. Others are specifically designed to provide information to university administrators and managers. For

example, by publishing a journal of *College Management*, Recruit Ltd. is also involved in issuing university rankings with more comprehensive information.

Although there are no university rankings created by government, in reality, since the early 2000s, by implementing national-level projects or programmes, the Japanese government has deliberatively stimulated structural diversification and functional differentiation of Japanese higher education systems. During the process, individual universities have also been compelled to be more transparent in their teaching and research activities, and internal managerial and governance arrangements. For example, in 2001, the Japanese government set the goal of fostering the "Top 30" universities towards attainment of top global standards. Later, the programme was changed into a scheme of cultivating 'Centers of Excellence in the 21st Century' (COE21). The central government chose to focus on and expand the budget for units in nine key disciplines. In 2009 the government launched a new Global 30 programme, aiming at accepting 300,000 foreign students by 2020. In order to achieve the goal, 13 universities, including seven national and six private, were selected to play a central role in implementing the programme. In 2012, the Japanese government implemented its "Global Human Resource" project. The project consists of two types. Type A encompasses government selected 11 universities, which are asked to produce more graduates with global perspectives and competencies. 31 faculties and graduate schools were selected in Type B focusing on producing global human resource in particular disciplines (MEXT, 2012). In 2014, the Japanese government issued its Top Global University Project. There are two types in this project. Type A (Top Type, 13 universities) is for world-class universities that have the potential to be ranked in the top 100 in world university rankings. Type B (Global Traction Type, 24 universities) is for innovative universities that lead the internationalisation of Japanese society (JSPS, 2017). These projects are not the same as the university rankings mentioned earlier, however, in practice the implementation of the projects has resulted in the disclosure of more factual information on relevant universities, increasing transparency of their missions and activities, and creating a gap between different universities.

With respect to national databases, soon after the end of WWII, the Japanese government implemented annual national surveys of higher education institutions, university faculty, international faculty and students, budgetary issues of higher

education institutions, and other related topics of higher education. Based on the findings of these national surveys, the Japanese government built national databases of school education, including higher education, and published them annually. By disclosing the information, the central government makes it possible for Japanese higher education be more transparent and accountable. Among diverse national surveys and databases of higher education, the most influential one is *Annual National School Survey*. Based on the survey, the national statistics of school education and higher education are published every year. The survey was started in 1948 and directly led the then Ministry of Education and the current MEXT. The structure of the survey consists of seven sections, including individual institutions, funding and real estate, infrastructure, new entry, graduates, faculty members, and students. The database of the survey is generally acknowledged to provide the most primary and fundamental statistics of overall Japanese education, including higher education. Further, partly based on relevant findings of the survey, the Research Institute for Higher Education of Hiroshima University (RIHE) also published *Statistics of Japanese Higher Education* (RIHE, 2017). Differing from the survey, which is designated more from government and administrative perspectives, the statistics are gathered, categorised and administered for the sake of research and for the benefit of higher education researchers in particular. The statistics consist of four broad sections: 1): enrolment, number of students, and number of graduates; 2) higher education institutions; 3): economy, society and higher educational institutions; and 4): Japanese economic and educational statistics. There are three classifications in each section: large classification, middle classification, and organisation classification. For example, within the large classification of numbers of students, there are middle-level classifications, including the data by gender, by university, by junior college, by college of technology, by university at a undergraduate level, graduate level and doctoral level; within the middle-level classification, there are statistics by institute, by gender and institutional sector and by field of study.

Interestingly, from the perspective of quality assurance, incentives of enhancing transparency of higher education in Japan have experienced the following phrases (Huang, 2006).

In the first phase from 1991 to 1997, with loosening up of the Standards of the Establishment of Universities and more powers delegated to individual institutions since 1991, the government took several measures to prevent a decline in educational quality. Initially, each national university was required to undertake self-monitoring and self- evaluation of its educational and research activities. By 1993, all national universities had appropriate structures in place with responsibilities for self-monitoring and self-evaluation and 50 of the 98 national universities had already published their results (MOE, 1993). In the second phase from 1998 to 2001, all universities were reminded of the requirement to publish the results of their self-monitoring and self-evaluation. In addition, to ensure the quality of their educational activities, each university was expected to have an external third party verify the results. Such third-party organisations could include associations of universities, academic societies, accreditation bodies and so forth. They are expected to introduce a range of evaluative modes. The basic idea was for universities to be able fully to demonstrate their own diverse characteristics and strengths while improving the quality of their education and research activities. In the third phase from 2002 to the present, the School Education Law, amended in 2002, makes it now compulsory for all universities, junior colleges, colleges of technology and law schools to be evaluated by a quality assurance agency accredited by MEXT. Not only the self-evaluated reports by each institution but also the results of reports by these external agencies were required to be open to the public. By 2005, Japan has constituted a new, plural, diversified system of evaluation and accreditation in which different actors and stakeholders are involved. Currently the new system is composed of major arrangements, which are mainly concerned with activities involved in assuring and enhancing the educational quality in the national sector. Especially the ex-post evaluations, which are often made up of self-assessment, certified and third-party accreditation and evaluation, are concerned with accreditation (to assess whether a university fulfills the required standards) and evaluation (to promote the quality enhancement of education and research, and transparency and efficiency of university governance and management) (MEXT, 2013).

An added measure of improving the transparency of national university corporations and local public university corporations has been taken since 2004 when all Japanese national universities became corporations. In accordance with the *National University Corporation Law* of 2003 (MEXT, 2003), with respect to one of the major changes in the governance of national and public university corporations, there is an

expectation of *"evaluation and disclosure of information-allocation of resources based on results of third-party evaluation thus ensuring transparency to encourage increased public participation."*

Since 2004, the corporatisation of Japanese national universities on improving the transparency of national universities is also profound and evident. For instance, implementing evaluation based on six-year goals and plans by each corporation and disclosing all the results of external or third-party evaluations on the corporations have tremendously enhanced the transparency of institutional governance, usage of public expenditure, and academic performance and more.

Transparency of Chinese higher education

Shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the central government created a national classification of higher education institutions in accordance with the former Soviet model. One of the most striking characteristics of the model is that the vast majority of higher educational institutions were practically categorised according to the social professional or vocational fields. At a system level, except for a very few comprehensive universities, which were normally made up of more than one field of study and specialty groups, a huge quantity of higher educational institutions were grouped into 11 types according to the 11 fields of study. Roughly speaking, numbers of students, faculty members, study programmes or specialised subjects were rigidly categorised in the classification (Huang, 2006). In a major sense, the classification was employed by the central government to administer and regulate all higher education institutions at a national level based on the planned economy. As of 1991, not only different types of non-university professional institutions were included in the classification, but also field of study, sub-field of study, types of specialty and numbers of programmes were listed. For example, in engineering institutions, the structure of undergraduate curriculum could be illustrated in Table 1.

1. Structure of the Undergraduate Curriculum in Engineering

Field of Study	Engineering
Sub-field of Study	Applied Geology, Mining, Power Engineering, Metallurgy, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Machines & Instruments, radio & Electronics, chemical Engineering, Grain Processing & Food Industry, Light Industry, Mapping, Surveying & Hydrology, Civil Engineering & Architecture, transportation, Telecommunications, and Others
Type of Specialties	364
Number of	4,761

Programmes	

Source: MOE (1991). *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China, 1990,* p.21. (in Chinese)

It seems that the first national statistics of education, including higher education in China, were published by the State Education Commission (renamed to Ministry of Education in 1998) in 1984. These include the statistics of Chinese education from 1949-1983. In 1986 an updated version of *Achievement of Education in China: Statistics 1980-1985* was published. However, in both, the statistics provide little information on higher education. For example, in the 1986 statistics, only statistics of regular higher educational institutions, postgraduates, numbers of students studying abroad, and numbers of foreign students in China are classified and collected (Department of Planning, 1986). From the early 1990s, *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China* was published yearly. This is a comprehensive yearbook which is collected and issued by the former State Education Commission. It includes comprehensive information, higher education, middle school education, elementary school education, pre-school education, special education, mature education, self-taught education, educational finance, and distribution of various educational institutions by region. The classification and publication of all these statistics is to provide an effective tool and indispensable factual information for relevant government divisions and sections to do research into education and to offer evidence for individual educational divisions, schools, higher education institutions to develop educational plans and guide reforms on education (Department of Planning & Construction, 1992).

Since 1999, the annual publication of two main national statistics of education has played a central role in enhancing the transparency of education of different levels and types in China. One is *Statistics of National Educational Enterprise* and the other is *Statistics of Information on Implementing Educational Expenditure*. The former provides detailed data of all levels and types of educational institutions ranging from pre-school education to doctoral education (MOE, 2017). The latter issues statistics of changes to educational expenditures by level, type, region, per pupil and student, etc. (MOE, 2017a).

According to current national classifications of higher education, contemporary Chinese higher education institutions can be categorised into three major types: regular public institutions, adult public institutions, and private institutions (*Minban* or *Shehui Liliang Banxue* in Chinese, meaning institutions run by the non-government sector or by social forces). The administration of most of the regular institutions and some adult institutions is vertically structured and financed by one of three types of administrative authorities: (1) the Ministry of Education; (2) central-level ministries and agencies; or (3) provinces and province-level municipalities. Except for two private adult institutions, the majority of adult institutions are run by local authorities with a few being administered by MOE and central-level ministries and agencies. There are hundreds of private institutions, but only four are qualified to confer bachelor's degrees. The remainder are two-year institutions with short-cycle programmes; these private institutions are almost totally dependent on students' tuition and fees. In addition to the above institutions, there are military institutions, mostly comprised of military personnel. Also, every year about 200,000 students achieve various certificates or bachelor's degrees through what is termed the "Self-Taught Examination System".

In relation to national ranking systems, since the early 2000s, major global university league tables have also increased the transparency of Chinese higher education. Similar to Japan, there are no national ranking tables which are developed by the central government or any public authorities. However, with the steady increase in numbers of different levels and types of higher education institution, and especially the diversifying structure and functions of Chinese higher education institutions, several rankings systems have been created and they have drawn a great deal of attention in recent years. To illustrate, as early as 2002, the first national ranking scheme of Chinese universities was lunched by a researcher Shulian Wu who belongs to Chinese Academy of Management Science. Currently, his rankings are concerned with a wide range of information on Chinese universities such as rankings of comprehensive capacity of all Chinese universities, the national-level 12 disciplines, 480 specialties of undergraduate studies, academic performance of university faculty, quality of new entrants, and quality of graduates, etc. The information is mainly provided for students who take part in the national entry examination to universities, their parents, and other stakeholders, helping them to observe and choose universities from various angles.

Rankings of Chinese Universities (*Wangda* in Chinese), which was developed by a Chinese company in 1999, also has a relatively powerful impact on students who choose their universities, foreign companies which seek business partners with Chinese universities, and individual domestic universities which want to locate themselves in the ranking (Wangda, 2017). By providing information on academic performance, the actual situation of input and output, quality of students, reputation, and others based on objective data and surveying, it publishes annual rankings of all Chinese universities. Together with other rankings of Chinese universities, it has helped various users to achieve a better understanding of and even monitor Chinese universities, and has therefore facilitated the transparency of Chinese higher education.

Although the central government has never assigned rankings of Chinese universities, the then State Education Commission made assessment of disciplines of higher education institutions and selected key disciplines among universities in 1986-88. In most cases, the universities with key disciplines, which were approved by the then State Education Commission, could be allocated additional funding and enjoyed more favourable academic and administrative policies. These universities are sometimes considered to be more academically competitive and socially reputable than others.

The impact of the 211 Project and the 985 Project on stimulating differentiation of Chinese universities cannot be overestimated, for it has significantly led to rearranging the position or rankings of individual universities. For example, through the launch of the 211 Project in 1994, the central government determined to establish 100 key universities in China by the 21st century. Among these, Peking University and Tsinghua University are expected to reach or approach a higher level in the world and become world-class institutions. Furthermore, China's Ministry of Education carried out the 985 Project in 1999 and nine universities were selected to be included in the Project as the first group. In October 2009, these nine universities agreed to create a Chinese counterpart to the Ivy League and formed the C9. Modelled on the Ivy League and Russell Group universities, the C9 are committed to the highest levels of academic excellence in teaching and research (Huang, 2015). As a result, the pyramid structure of Chinese higher education systems has been formed with the C9 as top universities, followed by those 985 Project universities,

211 Project universities, and in the middle level there are local public universities while at the lowest level there are non-government or private universities. Strictly speaking, both projects provide league tables of Chinese universities like other global or domestic university rankings as discussed above, but in reality they clearly outline top Chinese universities. The projects have not only contributed to the transparency of the Chinese higher education systems, but also made it possible for students, their families, industry, and other stakeholders to know more about these top universities in relation to their missions, long-term strategies, academic performance, financial situation, and governance and managerial issues.

It is noteworthy that China is building the database of basic teaching, for it is the first time the MoE has gathered, cleaned, and published all leading data of undergraduate education at a national level. The construction of the database was initiated in 2007 and directly led by Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education (HECME) (http://udb.heec.edu.cn/). In the database (MOE, 2011), nine broad groups of data are gathered. These include faculty members, teaching, educational expense, teaching and research equipment, teaching condition, basic information on students, students' activities outside classroom, research activities, and discipline construction. Within each group, several sub-categories of data are divided. In each sub-category, there are several items of data. The database aims at accomplishing the following four goals:

- allowing the government to analyse and monitor micro operation of teaching activities of all higher education institutions;
- allowing higher education institutions to promote and strengthen the scientific governance and management of each sector society;
- allowing the society and the public to disclose relevant information of all higher education institutions and to be supervised by the society; and
- allowing evaluation on teaching activities and monitoring, supervising and controlling the quality of teaching, to improve the effectiveness of evaluation and form the permanent mechanisms of monitoring and control.

Finally, since the early 2000s, the publication of results of external evaluation on all regular higher education institutions and colleges of technical and vocational education, and reports of quality of undergraduate education at a provincial level

since 2015 in particular have also become one of the most important tools in improving the transparency of Chinese higher education.

It appears that in recent decades more diverse tools of transparency have been created in both countries. It would be very difficult for central governments in the two countries to impose a direct and rigid control of QA in higher education by utilising traditional means without paying any attention to growingly diversifying demands from a wide variety of stakeholders. The new tools have played a growing role in helping to render higher education more transparent in the two countries. However, it should be pointed out that much improvement is needed in the newly-emerged systems of transparency (Woodhouse, 2008; Zhai, Y and Wang, Z. 2010; Soh, 2017).

Firstly, central governments in the two countries still exert the most powerful influence and leadership in relation to the QA of higher education, by formulating laws, acts, policies and strategies, and national-level programme or projects, and so on. The tendency of 'administerisation', or excessive administration of the enhanced transparency of higher education, remains clear and profound when compared to many Western countries. For example, all external or third-party evaluation agencies or organisations must be accredited by government, the chief criteria for measuring the QA of higher education institutions should be approved by government, and the opening and closing of higher education institutions are determined by government, and so forth.

Secondly, despite huge efforts made by both countries, there is still insufficient public information about teaching and learning activities, including students' learning outcomes, about administrative and managerial activities at institutional level and faculty levels, and about the engagement of higher education institutions with society. More such information is provided in the USA, the UK and Australia.

Thirdly, compared to EU countries in particular, in China and Japan there is less attention given to the development and employment of transparency tools at a regional and international dimension, and at global level. Students and their parents, and industry and other stakeholders have benefitted tremendously from the growth of diversified means of transparency. But nearly all of the information in relation to

the QA of higher education in both countries is directed to serving domestic users and stakeholders. The information base is lacking in international and global perspectives.

Finally, although the periodic publications of university rankings in the two countries have greatly improved the transparency of QA of higher education, the rankings have also been criticised by the academy, general public, media, and industry. More importantly, neither central government in the two countries has announced the official acceptance and utilisation of any university rankings for the purposes of policy making or of enhancing the quality of higher education. Other obvious drawbacks in relation to the existing university rankings, widely pointed out in the two countries, include: insufficient attention in the ranking systems to teaching and learning activities; use of limited sets of standardised indicators to measure constantly-changing institutional quality; insufficient emphasis on increasing diversification of the characteristics and backgrounds of higher education institutions; in some rankings, too much use of subjective opinions and unidentified data sources; and the fact that most university rankings tend to favour the English-speaking countries, and are especially beneficial to the USA and the UK. Rankings are widely seen as lacking in objectivity and scientific spirit and many believe that they should not be trusted as a reliable transparency tool.

Concluding remarks

As the modern higher education systems in both Japan and China were established, funded and administered by the central governments in the late 19th century, despite differences in degree and forms between the countries, only very limited transparency tools of higher education were employed, and almost all these tools were controlled by the governments prior to the 1980s. To what extent and in what ways the transparency of higher education was achieved was basically determined by the government. Since the 1990s, in addition to national classifications of higher education, and government reports or national-level projects, more diverse transparency tools of higher education have emerged in the two countries, such as university ranking systems developed by media and companies as well evaluation by researchers and third-parties. As complementary tools, they have also contributed significantly to the transparency of higher education by helping policy makers

develop strategies, students and their families choose universities, the public achieve a better understanding of the diversity of higher education, and industry and the job market monitor academic and governance performance of higher education institutions. In a major sense, in both countries, the transparency of higher education nowadays does not merely cater to government demand, as it used to prior to the 1980s. It has aimed to benefit a wide range of users, including students, their parents, individual higher education institutions, faculty members, administrators, graduates, workplaces, industry, and the public.

In fact, both governments have strived to utilise more diversified and effective means to improve the transparency of higher education in their countries although they may have taken different forms. Clear examples are the implementation of the “selection and concentration” strategy, the disclosure of results of external or third-party evaluation of universities, and the periodic publication of the quality of higher education to the public. However, in both countries the central government still plays a decisive and vital role in employing transparency tools of higher education and determining the degree to which the transparency of higher education can be achieved. The emergence of more diversified transparency tools in the two countries does not necessarily mean that the authorities and leadership, as well as control from government on individual higher education institutions, have been weakened or vanished. Government still rests between higher education institutions and stakeholders interested in higher education, including the market. The government has only changed its form and means of impacting higher education, shifting from a direct supervision and control to indirect guidance and monitoring through policy-oriented projects and budgetary means.

Noticeably, the national database created by the Chinese government seems to be a great leap and innovative tool in stimulating the transparency of higher education among the East Asian systems. This is because it is concerned with not only surveying, gathering, monitoring, regulating and controlling the actual situation of undergraduate education, but also examining a wide variety of activities at programme level, especially teaching processes – ‘a black box’ or ‘a shadow of higher education’. It is likely that the effective employment of the database might further improve the transparency of Chinese higher education and benefit more

diverse users, as well as provide a new perspective of enhancing the transparency of higher education for other countries in the future.

In terms of the implications of transparency tools of higher education in Japan and China and their practice, firstly, from the international and comparative perspectives, more in-depth and comprehensive research based on evidence like surveying and interviews need to be conducted. More research outputs of the effectiveness and efficiency of existing transparency tools and the clarification of what kinds of tools should be applied to specific contexts are expected.

Secondly, it is important for government to be more actively involved in developing more diverse and realistic tools to improve the transparency of higher education from the perspective of ‘public or common good’. More importantly, government or public authorities should play much stronger and evident roles in monitoring and making the public aware of features, especially limits and deficits of diverse tools.

Finally, while developing and utilising diverse transparency tools, individual institutions should always take students’ needs, scholarship, and the public goods into great consideration. The market tends to have growing impacts on producing and employing transparency tools worldwide, however, it should not be used as the only one means or most decisive way to achieve a higher level of transparency of higher education in both East Asian and European contexts.

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[i] For example, working description of transparency tools in European countries refers to "Transparency tools can be seen as having primarily an information provision function. Their users can be diverse, ranging from students and families to businesses, faculty and policy makers, such as HEIs' leaders and government officials. Within each category of beneficiaries, it can be expected that individuals have quite diverse information needs and expectations. It would be probably impossible for transparency tools to meet all individual demands at once." Retrieved from

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