

26.5.2026

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**Title**

Higher education quality assessment in China : an impact study / Shuiyun Liu

**Publication year**

2015

**Source/Footnote**

In: Higher education policy. - 28 (2015) 2, S. 175 - 195

**Inventory number**

38143

**Keywords**

Ausland : China : Hochschulwesen allgemein ; Ausland : China : Studenten, Studium, Lehre ;  
Qualitätssicherung

**Abstract**

This research analyses an external higher education quality assessment scheme in China, namely, the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education (QAUE) scheme. Case studies were conducted in three Chinese universities with different statuses. Analysis shows that the evaluated institutions responded to the external requirements of the QAUE actively, but the actual effects of the QAUE on university operations were not as high as expected. The empirical study of the QAUE indicates that quality assessments can trigger university change as an external force, but genuine change can only occur when it is integrated with internal motivation and capacities for change. The external and internal forces involved in the process are detailed. The analysis also shows that there is limited impetus for quality assessment as an external force driving university change. This is determined by the functional mechanism of quality assessment per se. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)