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Posted Date: 24 March 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202603.1948.v1

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Article

# Quality Assurance in Private Higher Education: A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and UK Systems Through Institutional Case Study

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## Abstract

Private higher education now accounts for approximately 33% of global enrolment, yet comparative empirical research on quality assurance (QA) systems in this sector, particularly across contrasting governance regimes, remains limited. This study examines the operational logic and effectiveness of QA mechanisms in Chinese and UK private higher education through a comparative analysis grounded in primary case study data (China) and systematic secondary literature review (UK). Drawing on a single institutional case study of a Chinese private university with a 40-year history, the study analyses the 'Four Promotions' developmental QA philosophy and compares it systematically with the UK's market-driven accountability model. The findings reveal three principal patterns: (1) the Chinese model prioritises developmental assessment, employing government-led evaluation to drive institutional construction, reform, management, and quality strengthening; (2) the UK model prioritises accountability and consumer protection, but faces documented challenges in regulatory coherence and quality coverage across a highly heterogeneous private sector; and (3) both models exhibit convergence trends towards greater balance between developmental and accountability orientations. To interpret these patterns, this study constructs a Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework (CAQAF), which advances existing frameworks by operationalising cultural context as a set of analytically distinct, comparable dimensions. The CAQAF offers both a theoretical contribution to cross-cultural QA research and practical guidance for nations seeking to develop quality assurance systems that are globally connected yet locally grounded.

**Keywords:** quality assurance; 'Four Promotions' philosophy; comparative research; cultural adaptability; marketisation; private higher education

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## 1. Introduction

Private higher education (PHE) has transitioned from a peripheral component to an indispensable pillar of the global academic landscape, now accounting for approximately 33% of total global enrolment. As institutions proliferate under the influence of marketisation and massification, the mechanisms used to ensure educational quality have become a focal point for global policy. This study explores the theoretical tension between the government-led developmental models of the East and the market-driven neoliberal models of the West to identify pathways for culturally adaptive quality assurance.

### 1.1. Research Background

Private higher education has become an indispensable component of the global higher education system, with its scale and influence continuing to expand. According to Levy's (2018) global survey data, private higher education currently accounts for 32.9% of total global higher education

enrolment. More importantly, 97.6% of countries and regions have established dual-track higher education systems with both public and private sectors. This global trend reflects the combined effects of multiple factors: the sustained increase in government financial pressure during the massification of higher education, the growing demand from various sectors of society for diversified and personalised educational choices, and the rapid development of education markets in the context of globalisation.

As Qureshi and Khawaja (2021) point out, the growth of private higher education represents a significant transformation occurring against the backdrop of liberalisation, privatisation, and marketisation. This transformation has not only changed the way higher education is provided but has also posed new requirements for quality assurance mechanisms. As the scale of private higher education rapidly expands and its influence continues to grow, quality assurance issues have increasingly become a focal point for academic research and policymaking.

Different countries and regions have formed differentiated private higher education quality assurance systems based on their unique historical traditions, cultural backgrounds, institutional environments, and developmental stages. However, beyond mere geographical or developmental differences, a profound theoretical tension exists between the contrasting governance philosophies that underpin these systems. This study specifically compares China and the UK to examine the friction between a government-led developmental state—which prioritises collective progress and centralised coordination—and a market-driven neoliberal state—which emphasises individual consumer choice and institutional autonomy.

As the world's largest developing country, China's private higher education has experienced a leapfrog development process from nothing to something, from small to large, and from weak to strong since the reform and opening up. The 'Four Promotions' philosophy (以评促建、以评促改、以评促管、以评促强) has been the guiding principle of Chinese higher education quality assessment, formally established in the Ministry of Education's Implementation Plan for the Review and Evaluation of Undergraduate Education and Teaching (2021-2025) (MoE, 2021).

In contrast, the UK, with its long-established quality assurance infrastructure, presents entirely different characteristics (Hoecht, 2006). King's (2018) research points out that UK private higher education quality assurance relies more on market mechanisms and professional accreditation, emphasising risk-based regulatory strategies and consumer rights protection. This market-oriented quality assurance model is deeply rooted in the UK's free market economic tradition and individualistic cultural background, forming a sharp contrast with China's government-led model.

By comparing these two "ideal types" of governance, this study aims to move beyond descriptive analysis to explore how quality assurance effectiveness is moderated by these fundamental institutional logics. Liu and Hafeez's (2025) recent research provide a detailed analysis of the evolution and mainstreaming process of Chinese private higher education, noting that private higher education institutions have played important roles in meeting diverse educational needs and promoting educational innovation. This provides important background reference for this study, particularly in understanding the historical context and practical challenges of Chinese private higher education development.

Despite this growing literature, a critical research gap persists. Existing comparative studies predominantly focus on public university systems, leaving the private sector — which now constitutes approximately one-third of global enrolment — comparatively underexamined in cross-national comparative scholarship. Moreover, studies that directly juxtapose government-led developmental models with market-driven neoliberal models within the specific context of private higher education remain scarce. The present study addresses this gap by providing an empirically grounded comparative analysis of Chinese and UK private higher education quality assurance systems, anchored by a theoretically coherent framework designed explicitly to account for cultural and institutional context.

## 1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

Although existing research has explored quality assurance in higher education in China and the UK to some extent, in-depth comparative research specifically focused on the private higher education sector remains scarce. To address this gap, this study poses four interconnected research questions and corresponding objectives.

How is China's 'Four Promotions' quality assurance philosophy embodied in private higher education practice, what are its specific implementation mechanisms, and what practical effects has it achieved?

What institutional characteristics does the UK's market-oriented private higher education quality assurance system possess, and what challenges does it face in practice?

What are the main differences between the private higher education quality assurance systems of China and the UK, and what are the underlying reasons for these differences?

How can quality assurance models under different cultural and institutional backgrounds achieve a balance between effectiveness and adaptability?

Corresponding to these questions, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

To analyse the implementation and effects of China's 'Four Promotions' philosophy through empirical case study.

To critically examine the UK's market-oriented quality assurance system and its challenges.

To compare both models across governance, assessment, improvement, and participation dimensions.

To develop a Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework (CAQAF) for cross-cultural understanding.

Through pursuing these objectives, this study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical development of quality assurance in private higher education, particularly for countries seeking to establish culturally appropriate yet internationally recognised quality assurance systems.

It should be noted that the four research questions map directly onto the four analytical dimensions of the CAQAF introduced in Section 3.4. Research Questions 1 and 2 generate the empirical content that is subsequently coded against the governance, assessment, improvement, and stakeholder dimensions. Research Question 3 is addressed through the cross-dimensional analysis in Section 5.2. Research Question 4 motivates the CAQAF construction itself and is addressed theoretically in Sections 3.4 and 7.4. This alignment ensures that the analytical framework structures the study design from the outset rather than being imposed retrospectively.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts differentiated research strategies for China and the UK, which reflect both practical considerations and methodological rigour (Tobin and Begley, 2004).

For the Chinese case, in-depth case study methodology is essential given the unique nature of the 'Four Promotions' philosophy and the need for first-hand empirical data (Starman, 2013). For the UK case, extensive existing literature allows for comprehensive analysis through secondary sources (Bandara et al., 2015). This differentiated approach ensures both research depth and cross-national comparability.

This study employs qualitative research methods, comprehensively utilising both case study and comparative analysis research strategies. In case selection, this study follows the principle of purposive sampling, selecting a Chinese private university with a 40-year history, more than 30,000 enrolled students, and over 2,000 staff members as the in-depth case. The university has 13 secondary colleges and 50 undergraduate programmes, and completed its undergraduate teaching evaluation at the end of 2024, providing rich first-hand empirical material for analysing the practice of the 'Four Promotions' philosophy.

The selection of China and the UK as comparative cases is grounded in a most-different systems design: the two countries represent contrasting governance regimes — a developmental state with

centralised coordination versus a neoliberal state with market-driven regulation — thereby maximising the analytical leverage of the comparison. The case institution within China was selected through purposive sampling on the basis of three criteria: (1) sufficient institutional maturity to have experienced multiple evaluation cycles; (2) a size representative of mid-scale Chinese private universities; and (3) the recent completion of an undergraduate teaching evaluation, providing temporally relevant first-hand data. The institution's profile is broadly representative of established, applied-orientation private universities in eastern China, though findings should not be generalised to smaller, newer, or regionally atypical institutions without further corroboration.

To ensure the integrity of the findings and mitigate potential “institutional gaming behaviours” or purely symbolic compliance—common challenges in government-led evaluation contexts—this study employed a robust data triangulation strategy. Subjective insights gathered from in-depth interviews with faculty and management were systematically cross-verified against objective “quality data statistical analysis” covering the 2021–2024 period.

In terms of participants and data collection, the primary data for the Chinese case comprised two sources: (1) semi-structured interviews with faculty members ( $n = 12$ ), middle managers ( $n = 8$ ), and senior administrators ( $n = 5$ ) at the case institution, conducted between October 2024 and January 2025; and (2) institutional statistical records and policy documents spanning 2021–2024, including teaching quality reports, graduate employment data, faculty development records, and evaluation self-assessment materials. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, audio-recorded with written consent, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were translated into English and verified through back-translation. Participant anonymity was maintained through role-based codes.

For instance, qualitative claims regarding improved teaching efficacy and the success of the “N+1” scheme were validated against longitudinal multi-year trends, such as the dramatic increase in the graduate employment settlement rate from 62.38% to 84.74%. Furthermore, internal quality claims were checked against external benchmarks, such as the rise in undergraduate thesis sampling pass rates from 96.50% to 99.80%. This rigorous alignment suggests that the reported outcomes of the “Four Promotions” philosophy are consistent with substantive operational changes rather than mere administrative window-dressing, though the single-case design precludes definitive causal attribution.

The comparative analysis section is mainly based on literature research and secondary data, systematically reviewing the institutional arrangements, practical characteristics, and development trends of UK private higher education quality assurance and conducting in-depth comparative analysis with the Chinese case.

The use of different research methods for China and the UK in this study is fully justified. The adoption of in-depth case study methodology for the Chinese case is based on the following considerations: Firstly, as the ‘Four Promotions’ philosophy is unique to China, accurately grasping its theoretical connotations and practical mechanisms requires in-depth field research and first-hand data collection; Secondly, Chinese private higher education has developed for a relatively short time with limited existing research, requiring the accumulation of foundational empirical material through case studies; Thirdly, the selected case institution is typical and representative, able to reflect general patterns in Chinese private higher education quality assurance.

The primary use of literature research methodology for the UK case is based on the following reasons: Firstly, the UK private higher education quality assurance system is relatively mature, with abundant research literature and policy documents available for analysis; Secondly, the institutional characteristics and operational mechanisms of the UK quality assurance system are relatively stable, and its core features can be accurately grasped through literature research; Thirdly, this study focuses on theoretical comparison and framework construction, and literature research can provide sufficient theoretical support. This differentiated research strategy ensures both research depth and feasibility.

### 2.3. Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to data collection. All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. All data were anonymised and stored securely in accordance with institutional data protection protocols, and no personally identifiable information is reported in this study.

### 2.4. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data. Initial codes were generated inductively and subsequently grouped into themes aligned with the four CAQAF dimensions. Comparative dimensions for the China–UK analysis emerged iteratively through constant comparison of primary case data and secondary UK literature. To ensure trustworthiness, four criteria from Tobin and Begley (2004) were addressed: (1) Credibility was established through data triangulation, cross-verifying interview data against institutional statistical records; (2) Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of analytical decisions; (3) Confirmability was strengthened by grounding all interpretive claims in verifiable sources; and (4) Transferability is addressed in the Discussion through explicit consideration of contextual boundaries.

## 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section organises the existing literature around three interlocking conceptual themes that directly motivate the present study: (1) the theoretical evolution of quality assurance from universalist to culturally contingent frameworks; (2) the dynamics of government-led developmental QA systems, examined through scholarship on the Chinese context; and (3) the dynamics of market-driven accountability systems, examined through scholarship on the UK context. Each theme is reviewed critically, with attention to the theoretical gaps that existing models have not adequately addressed. The section concludes by introducing the Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework (CAQAF) as a direct theoretical response to these accumulated gaps.

### 3.1. Theoretical Evolution of Quality Assurance

The development of quality assurance theory can be understood as a progressive movement from models that assumed cross-institutional applicability towards frameworks that acknowledge the conditioning role of context, culture, and sector. Three foundational contributions are particularly relevant to the present study, each advancing the field whilst leaving specific gaps that CAQAF is designed to address.

Billing's (2004) "General Model" identifies the procedural architecture of external quality assurance — self-assessment, external review, public reporting, and follow-up improvement — and represents a foundational contribution to the field. Its critical limitation, however, lies in the assumption of institutional homogeneity: the model treats these procedures as culturally neutral and universally applicable, overlooking the fundamental differences between public and private sectors and neglecting alternative quality paradigms emerging from non-Western contexts. CAQAF departs from this by treating the implementation of each procedural element as culturally conditioned, making explicit what Billing's model leaves implicit.

Dill and Beerkens (2010) similarly advanced the field by emphasising "framework conditions" — academic traditions, government capacity, and market maturity — as determinants of quality assurance effectiveness. This insight is theoretically valuable and directly informs the present study. Its limitation, however, is that cultural factors remain a background variable rather than being operationalised into analytically distinct, comparable dimensions. CAQAF advances Dill and Beerkens' contribution by making cultural context the central explanatory variable and decomposing it into four specific dimensions — governance model, assessment methods, improvement

mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement — that can be applied systematically to both primary case data and secondary literature.

Taken together, these contributions establish that effective quality assurance cannot be theorised independently of the institutional and cultural conditions in which it operates. However, none of the models reviewed above provides an operationalised framework for conducting structured cross-cultural comparison between governance regimes as divergent as those of China and the UK. This gap directly motivates the development of CAQAF.

### *3.2. Research on Chinese Private Higher Education Quality Assurance*

The Chinese scholarship on private higher education quality assurance converges around a central tension: the coexistence of strong government control, nascent market mechanisms, and the aspiration for institutional autonomy. Three contributions are directly relevant to the present study's focus on the Four Promotions philosophy and its developmental logic.

Cao and Li's (2014) "quality assurance triangle" framework illuminates the three-way relationship between government, market, and institutions in Chinese quality assurance. Its principal limitation is the assumption of balanced relationships among these three actors: in practice, government control is dominant in Chinese contexts, and the framework does not explain how market mechanisms can operate effectively within an authoritarian governance structure. This asymmetry is precisely the dynamic that the Four Promotions philosophy attempts to manage, making it a key reference point for the present analysis.

Wang (2014) identifies the tensions between control, accountability, and autonomy in Chinese quality assurance as a persistent structural feature of the system. The analysis is insightful but remains largely descriptive: it documents the tensions without theorising why they persist, and without examining how the Four Promotions philosophy specifically attempts to reconcile these competing demands through developmental evaluation. This study takes up Wang's diagnosis and examines whether the Four Promotions model offers a viable resolution to the accountability–development dilemma.

Liu (2013) demonstrates that quality evaluation impacts vary across institutions, confirming that external evaluation does not uniformly produce quality improvement. The more significant limitation of his analysis, however, is the implicit assumption that external pressure translates naturally into institutional change, without adequately theorising the conditions under which institutional gaming behaviours and symbolic compliance can be overcome. The present study addresses this limitation directly through its triangulation strategy: by cross-verifying interview-derived claims against longitudinal institutional data, it provides empirical evidence bearing on whether the improvements documented represent genuine quality change or surface-level compliance.

The Chinese scholarship reviewed above documents the institutional contours of a government-led developmental QA system but has not produced a cross-culturally applicable framework for comparing it with market-driven alternatives. In particular, the mechanisms through which the Four Promotions philosophy converts external evaluation pressure into genuine internal improvement — rather than symbolic compliance — remain theoretically underspecified. This is the empirical gap the present case study is designed to address.

### *3.3. Research on UK Private Higher Education Quality Assurance*

The UK scholarship on private higher education quality assurance reveals a sector characterised by regulatory fragmentation, contested governance legitimacy, and persistent tension between market mechanisms and public quality obligations. Three bodies of work are particularly salient.

Hunt and Boliver's (2023) survey of 802 UK private providers identifies four distinct institutional types and reveals a sector far more heterogeneous than policy discourse typically acknowledges. Their finding that approximately 50% of providers are for-profit institutions offering sub-degree courses that are subject to minimal regulatory oversight represents a fundamental challenge to

market-based quality assurance assumptions. Crucially, their study documents this regulatory gap without fully theorising why market mechanisms have consistently failed to ensure quality across all provider types – a question that the CAQAF's governance model dimension is designed to address comparatively.

King's (2018) analysis of the "Regulatory Turn" frames the OfS's adoption of risk-based regulation as a theoretically coherent response to the challenges of governing a diverse private sector. The framework's subsequent difficulties, however, expose its underlying assumptions: risk-based regulation presupposes that institutional risk can be accurately assessed and managed, yet it fails to account for the fundamental information asymmetries that characterise private education markets. The critiques by Oliver (2025) – who identifies a crisis of regulatory legitimacy at the OfS – and Kahl (2025) – who documents systemic governance vulnerabilities – confirm that King's optimism was premature. Areshka and Bradley's (2025) statistical critique of the B3 progression metric further undermines the data-driven accountability model that underpins the Regulatory Turn.

Maddox-Daines (2021) distinguishes between external quality assurers as 'Arbiters of Standards' in private institutions versus external examiners as 'Critical Friends' in universities. Whilst illuminating, this binary distinction oversimplifies complex quality assurance relationships and neglects how institutional power dynamics shape these roles. Furthermore, her analysis does not address how this role differentiation may inadvertently create quality disparities between sectors, potentially reinforcing rather than resolving quality assurance inequities.

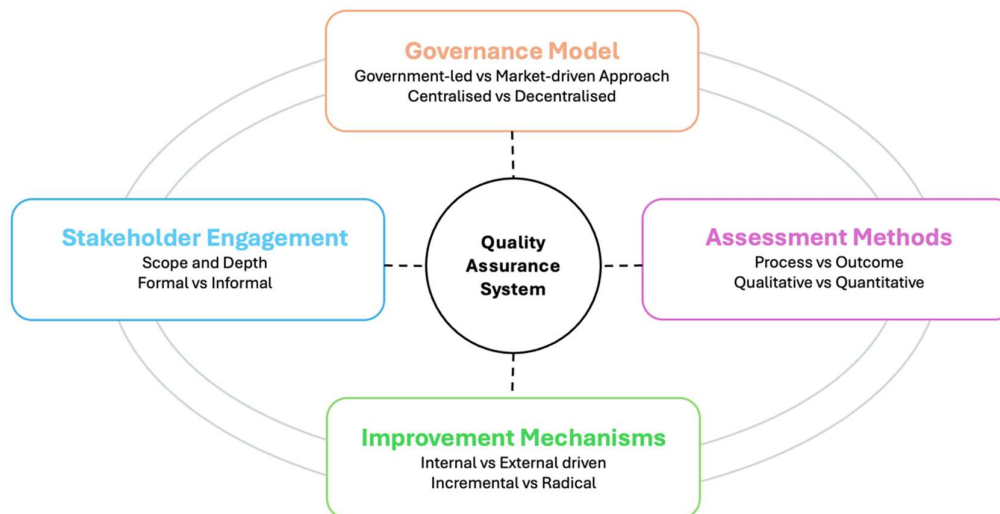
McClaran's (2018) historical review of QAA development emphasises international influences on national quality assurance. Nevertheless, his analysis underestimates how globalisation pressures may conflict with local quality needs, particularly in diverse private sectors. Additionally, his work insufficiently examines whether international frameworks designed for traditional universities can effectively govern heterogeneous private providers with vastly different missions, resources, and student populations.

The collective limitations of the UK scholarship reviewed above reveal a critical theoretical gap: whilst documenting private sector diversity and regulatory challenges, existing research lacks frameworks that explain why market-based quality assurance produces such uneven outcomes, and fails to provide viable alternatives that balance market flexibility with quality assurance. This gap is the UK-side counterpart to the gap identified in Section 3.2, and both together motivate the construction of CAQAF.

### *3.4. Theoretical Framework Construction*

Based on these critical assessments, this study constructs a Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework (CAQAF) that addresses existing theoretical gaps, as shown in Figure 1. Unlike previous frameworks that assume universal applicability, CAQAF explicitly recognises cultural contingency in quality assurance effectiveness.

It is important to specify what CAQAF adds beyond the two most relevant prior frameworks. Billing's (2004) General Model identifies procedural components of quality assurance but assumes cultural neutrality. Dill and Beerkens' (2010) framework conditions approach acknowledges contextual factors but leaves the cultural dimension underoperationalised. CAQAF advances both by treating cultural context as the central explanatory variable and decomposing it into four analytically distinct, comparable dimensions. The result is not merely a different descriptive catalogue but a different theoretical claim: that the same procedural mechanism will produce different outcomes depending on the cultural and institutional context in which it operates, and that cross-national comparison requires a framework capable of capturing this variation systematically.



*The four dimensions interact dynamically, influenced by cultural context and institutional environment*

**Figure 1.** Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework.

CAQAF is not merely a descriptive tool but serves as the structural foundation for the subsequent institutional analysis. The four dimensions—Governance Model, Assessment Methods, Improvement Mechanisms, and Stakeholder Engagement—function as “coding nodes” to categorise and analyse both the Chinese case data and the UK literature.

**Governance Node:** Analyses the centralised coordination in China versus the dispersed market autonomy in the UK.

**Assessment Node:** Contrasts unified qualitative standards with data-driven, multiple-standard accreditation.

**Improvement Node:** Compares endogenous development driven by evaluation with external competitive pressure.

**Stakeholder Node:** Examines expert-led institutional cooperation against consumer-oriented market choices

Governance Model, which involves the dominant forces in quality assurance, decision-making mechanisms, and power allocation. Countries show obvious differences in this dimension: some adopt government-led models, emphasising unified standards and centralised management; some adopt market-led models, relying on competition mechanisms and consumer choice; others adopt hybrid models, seeking balance between government regulation and market mechanisms.

Assessment Methods, including the choice of assessment focus, assessment standards, and assessment techniques. Assessment can focus on process or outcomes, adopt unified or diverse standards, use qualitative or quantitative methods—these choices all reflect different quality views and value orientations.

Improvement Mechanisms, covering sources of improvement motivation, choice of improvement pathways, and methods of improvement support. Improvement can be internally driven or pushed by external pressure, can adopt gradual improvement or radical transformation, can be supported through resource investment or promoted through market incentives.

Stakeholder Engagement, including the composition of participating entities, choice of participation methods, and depth of participation. Different quality assurance systems show great variation in stakeholder participation, and this variation reflects different democratic traditions and governance cultures.

Crucially, CAQAF transcends the limitations of both universalist models (which ignore cultural variation) and relativist approaches (which abandon quality standards). Instead, it proposes dynamic adaptation where quality assurance systems maintain core principles whilst adjusting

implementation to cultural contexts. These four dimensions are not mutually independent but interact and influence each other. Meanwhile, cultural background and institutional environment, as moderating variables, profoundly influence the specific manifestations and interrelationships of each dimension. This systematic and contextual analytical framework provides a powerful tool for understanding and comparing quality assurance systems across different countries.

#### **4. Chinese Private Higher Education Quality Assurance: Institutional Analysis and Practical Exploration**

China's private higher education system has undergone a rapid "leapfrog" development, guided by a distinctive socialist framework that prioritises centralised coordination and educational equity. Central to this approach is the "Four Promotions" philosophy, a developmental assessment model that treats evaluation as a compass for institutional construction, reform, and strengthening. This section provides an institutional analysis of how these national mandates are operationalised within the private sector.

##### *4.1. Institutional Background and Policy Framework*

The formation and development of China's private higher education quality assurance system is deeply rooted in the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. Since the reform and opening up, Chinese private higher education has experienced four stages: restoration, development, standardisation, and enhancement. Throughout this historical process, the government has consistently played a leading role, establishing a comprehensive quality assurance system covering admission approval, process monitoring, and outcome evaluation.

The core characteristics of China's private higher education quality assurance system can be summarised as "unified standards, classified guidance, using evaluation to promote construction". Unified standards embody the value pursuit of educational equity under the socialist system, ensuring that all higher education institutions meet basic quality standards stipulated by the state. Classified guidance acknowledges objective differences among private universities of different types, levels, and regions, allowing distinctive development. Using evaluation to promote construction embodies the traditional Chinese cultural concept of "curing the disease to save the patient", treating evaluation as a means to promote development rather than a simple tool for survival of the fittest.

This institutional design forms a sharp contrast with Western market-oriented models. Under China's institutional framework, whilst the market plays an important role in resource allocation, the government maintains control over educational direction, quality standards, and fairness. The advantage of this model lies in its ability to establish a nationwide quality assurance system relatively quickly, ensuring standardised development of private higher education, though it may also inhibit institutional innovation vitality and face challenges in meeting diverse social needs.

##### *4.2. Theoretical Connotations and Practical Logic of the 'Four Promotions' Philosophy*

"Using evaluation to promote construction, reform, management, and strengthening" (abbreviated as the 'Four Promotions') is the core philosophy of Chinese higher education quality assurance. It is not merely a set of evaluation principles but a developmental philosophy of education with Chinese characteristics. Liu and Liu (2017) point out that the formation of this philosophy has undergone long-term practical exploration and theoretical refinement, embodying Chinese educators' profound understanding of the laws of higher education development.

"Using evaluation to promote construction" emphasises promoting infrastructure construction and condition improvement through evaluation. The 'construction' here refers not only to hardware facility construction but more importantly includes soft power construction such as system building, team building, and culture building. Problems and deficiencies discovered during the evaluation process become key directions for the next phase of construction. This philosophy transforms

evaluation from a mere judgement tool into a compass for construction, giving evaluation a clear construction orientation.

“Using evaluation to promote reform” focuses on promoting educational and teaching reform through evaluation. Evaluation is not meant to maintain the status quo but to break conventions and bring forth new ideas. Through evaluation, problems in educational philosophy, training models, curriculum systems, and teaching methods are discovered, promoting deep-level reform and innovation. This reform is not change for change’s sake, but systematic transformation based on problem-orientation and goal-orientation.

“Using evaluation to promote management” aims to enhance management level and governance capability through evaluation. Modern university system construction requires scientific management and effective governance, and evaluation provides an important opportunity to test and improve management. Through evaluation, management standardisation, scientification, and refinement are promoted, improving management efficiency and effectiveness.

“Using evaluation to promote strengthening” pursues enhancing operational strength and competitive capability through evaluation. The ‘strengthening’ here is comprehensive, including disciplinary and professional strength, talent cultivation capability, scientific research level, social service functions, and cultural inheritance and innovation. Evaluation becomes an important driving force for promoting connotative development, distinctive development, and innovative development.

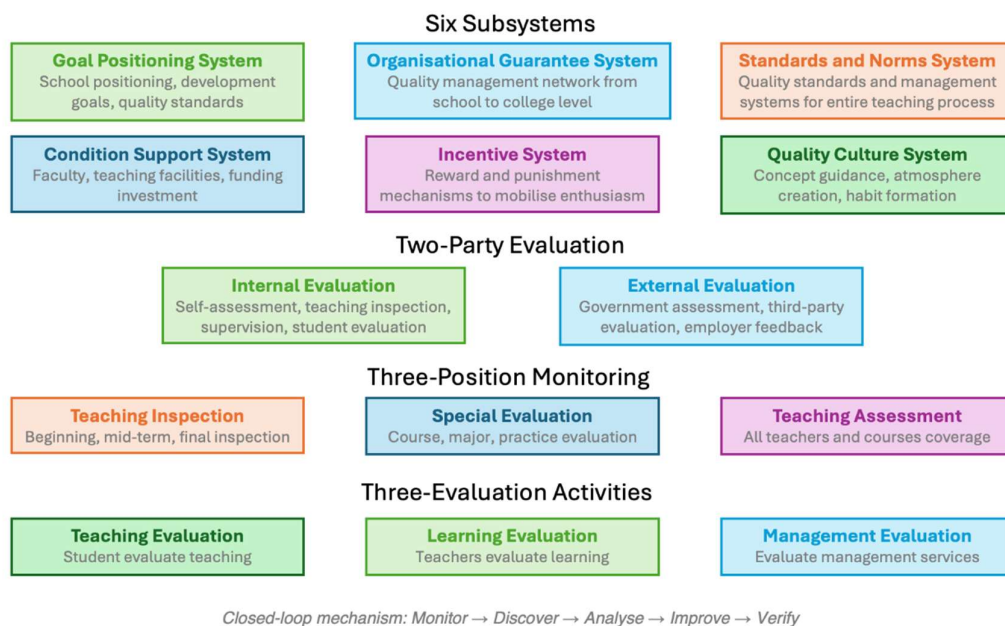
These four aspects are not isolated but form an organic whole of interconnection and mutual promotion. Construction provides the foundation for reform, reform indicates the direction for management, management provides guarantee for strengthening, and strengthening puts forward new requirements for construction, forming a spiralling development cycle. This systematic thinking embodies the holistic view and dialectics of traditional Chinese philosophy and also conforms to the basic principles of modern systems theory.

#### *4.3. Case Analysis: Practical Exploration of the Quality Assurance System*

To move from broad policy analysis to empirical evidence, this study examines a representative Chinese private university with a 40-year history and over 30,000 students. By focusing on this institution’s unique “6233” quality assurance and monitoring system, we can observe the creative transformation of the “Four Promotions” philosophy into measurable pedagogical and management outcomes.

##### *4.3.1. Overall Architecture of the ‘6233’ Quality Assurance System*

The case institution selected for this study has formed a distinctive ‘6233’ quality assurance and monitoring system after 40 years of development (see Figure 2). This system represents an organic integration of systems theory thinking and total quality management concepts.



**Figure 2.** '6233' Quality Assurance and Monitoring System.

The system comprises six subsystems that constitute the basic framework: goal positioning clarifies operational direction and quality standards; organisational guarantee establishes a quality management network from university to college levels; standards and norms formulate quality criteria covering the entire teaching process; condition support provides necessary human, material, and financial resources; incentive mechanisms mobilise enthusiasm through rewards and accountability; and quality culture internalises quality consciousness as a core organisational element.

Two-party evaluation combines internal assessment (including self-evaluation, teaching inspection, and student feedback) with external evaluation (government review, third-party assessment, and employer feedback), ensuring both routine monitoring and independent validation. Three-position monitoring achieves comprehensive coverage through teaching inspection at key time nodes, special evaluation of critical links, and teaching assessment covering all faculty and courses. Three-evaluation activities promote multi-stakeholder participation through teaching evaluation by students, learning evaluation by teachers, and management evaluation by the academic community.

The university has established a closed-loop operating mechanism ensuring that discovered problems receive timely treatment and improvements produce measurable effects. The system itself continuously evolves, adjusting quality assurance content and standards according to changing internal and external environments.

#### 4.3.2. Innovative Practice of the 'Four Promotions' Philosophy

In practising the 'Four Promotions' philosophy, the case institution has not simply copied it but has undertaken creative transformation and innovative development based on its own reality.

Regarding "using evaluation to promote construction", the university not only focuses on improving material conditions but emphasises enhancing connotative construction. In recent years, the university has established 12 provincial-level engineering technology centres, key laboratories, and scientific research innovation platforms, with library holdings exceeding 2.1 million paper books and 1.03 million electronic books. More importantly, the university has promoted renewal of educational philosophy, optimisation of training programmes, and reconstruction of curriculum systems through evaluation. The university has established the educational philosophy of "student-centred, outcome-oriented, continuous improvement", constructed a curriculum system organically

integrating general education, professional education, and innovation and entrepreneurship education, and formed a training model with theoretical teaching, practical teaching, and quality development supporting each other.

Regarding “using evaluation to promote reform”, the university treats evaluation as an important opportunity to deepen educational and teaching reform. Through evaluation, the university discovered that traditional teaching models could no longer meet the needs of talent cultivation in the new era, therefore vigorously promoting teaching method reform and popularising new teaching methods such as case teaching, project teaching, and problem-based learning. The university has also deepened credit system reform, implementing major-minor systems, credit mutual recognition systems, and flexible academic systems, giving students more choice and autonomy.

Particularly noteworthy is the university’s innovative implementation of the ‘N+1’ course assessment scheme. This scheme organically combines process evaluation (N)—multiple diversified assessments conducted throughout the semester—with a single summative evaluation (1). By de-emphasising high-stakes final exams, the scheme fosters continuous student engagement and provides the real-time data necessary for the “continuous improvement” mandate of the ‘Four Promotions’ philosophy. This allows the institution to more comprehensively evaluate students’ learning effectiveness while ensuring pedagogical adjustments are data driven.

Regarding “using evaluation to promote management”, the university has comprehensively enhanced the scientification and standardisation of management through evaluation. The university has formulated and improved more than 50 teaching management systems, covering various aspects including teaching operation, quality monitoring, teacher management, and student management. The university has also established a teaching management information system, achieving informatisation and intelligence in teaching management. Through big data analysis, the university can promptly discover problems and anomalies in teaching operations, improving management precision and timeliness. In the past three years, the university has handled more than 200 various teaching violations, maintaining normal teaching order and good academic atmosphere.

Regarding “using evaluation to promote strengthening”, the university continuously enhances its operational strength and social influence through evaluation. The university has formed three distinctive professional clusters in smart agriculture, intelligent manufacturing, and marine chemicals, with 10 programmes approved as provincial-level first-class undergraduate programme construction sites. Student cultivation quality has significantly improved, with 1,409 students admitted to postgraduate programmes in the past five years, including 257 entering ‘Double First-Class’ universities for further study. The university ranks among the top in the national ranking of university student competitions for newly established undergraduate institutions, fully demonstrating the effectiveness of applied talent cultivation. The university also actively serves local economic and social development, becoming an important component of the regional innovation system.

#### 4.3.3. Significant Effects of Quality Enhancement

Through systematic implementation of the ‘Four Promotions’ quality assurance philosophy, the case institution has achieved significant results across multiple dimensions.

In terms of talent cultivation quality, key indicators continue to improve. The pass rate for undergraduate graduation design (thesis) sampling inspection increased dramatically from 96.50% in 2023 to 99.80% in 2024. This improvement is reflected not only in quantity but more importantly in quality connotation. Student topics are more closely aligned with reality, research methods are more scientific, and innovation is significantly enhanced. The graduation certificate acquisition rate has remained above 99% for three consecutive years, and the degree conferment rate has also remained high, indicating that whilst ensuring cultivation quality, the university also pays attention to students’ comprehensive development and individualised needs.

Employment quality is an important measure for testing talent cultivation effectiveness. The university's graduate employment settlement rate increased from 62.38% in 2022 to 84.74% in 2024. This improvement was achieved against the backdrop of increased economic downward pressure and a severe employment situation, making it all the more valuable. More importantly, employment quality is also steadily improving, with marked improvements in graduates' professional alignment rate, salary levels, and career development prospects. Third-party surveys show that employer satisfaction with university graduates exceeds 97%, with particularly high praise for graduates' practical abilities, innovative spirit, and teamwork.

Important progress has been made in faculty team construction. Through a strategy of both recruitment and cultivation, the university continuously optimises its faculty structure. The student-teacher ratio has been optimised from 19.26:1 to 18.05:1, approaching the excellent standard stipulated by the Ministry of Education. More importantly, teachers' teaching abilities and professional levels have markedly improved, with multiple provincial-level and above teaching achievement awards received in recent years, and significantly enhanced capability to undertake national and provincial-level research projects.

Innovation and entrepreneurship education has become a bright calling card for the university. In 2024, the proportion of undergraduates participating in innovation and entrepreneurship practical activities reached 96.90%, nearly achieving full coverage. Students have repeatedly achieved excellent results in various innovation and entrepreneurship competitions, particularly outstanding performance in important competitions such as the 'Internet+' University Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition. The university has established a comprehensive innovation and entrepreneurship education system, including curriculum systems, practice platforms, incubation bases, and mentor teams, providing all-round support for student innovation and entrepreneurship.

#### *4.4. Challenge Identification and Response Strategies*

Despite significant achievements, the case institution faces interconnected challenges common to Chinese private higher education quality assurance. The most fundamental challenge concerns quality culture construction. Whilst comprehensive systems exist, truly internalising quality consciousness as conscious action by all stakeholders remains a long-term endeavour. Some faculty still view quality assurance as an additional burden rather than an intrinsic need, whilst formalistic tendencies persist in certain management practices. The university is addressing this through continuous cultural cultivation and mechanism innovation.

Equally significant is the tension between standardisation and distinctiveness. Meeting national unified standards whilst developing operational characteristics requires careful balance. The university is exploring a "standards-plus-distinctiveness" model that ensures basic requirements are met whilst focusing on developing comparative advantages in selected areas. This approach acknowledges that complete standardisation may inhibit innovation whilst excessive differentiation risks compromising essential quality.

Resource constraints present ongoing challenges for quality enhancement. As a private institution with limited resources, particularly in high-level talent recruitment and research platform construction, the university must achieve continuous improvement through more precise resource allocation and efficient utilisation. Strategies include deepening industry-education integration, strengthening social cooperation, and optimising internal management to overcome resource limitations.

Finally, the scientificity and timeliness of evaluation methods require improvement. Current approaches rely heavily on qualitative assessment with relatively few quantitative indicators, limiting objectivity and comparability. The university is developing a big data-based quality monitoring system to enhance evaluation precision and enable more responsive quality improvement through real-time data analysis.

## 5. UK Private Higher Education Quality Assurance and Comparative Analysis

In contrast to the Chinese model, the UK's approach to private higher education is fundamentally market-oriented, positioning students as consumers and quality as a function of market order. This section utilises the CAQAF dimensions to perform a side-by-side comparison, exploring how these two "ideal types" of governance—the developmental state and the neoliberal state—navigate the complexities of quality, accountability, and institutional autonomy.

### 5.1. Institutional Characteristics of the UK Quality Assurance System

The UK regulatory landscape is defined by the "Regulatory Turn," a shift toward risk-based oversight led by the Office for Students (OfS). This system prioritises financial sustainability and consumer rights, yet it faces ongoing challenges regarding regulatory "blind spots" and the methodological reliability of its data-driven metrics. Understanding these characteristics is essential to identifying the strengths and vulnerabilities of a market-led QA model.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge a methodological caveat. The "market-driven" characterisation of UK private higher education quality assurance is deployed here as a theoretical ideal type — a deliberate analytical simplification intended to facilitate structured comparison with the Chinese developmental model — rather than as an empirical description of a homogeneous sector. In practice, Hunt and Boliver (2023) demonstrate that the UK private higher education landscape encompasses at least four distinct institutional types with substantially different missions, resources, and regulatory relationships. Approximately half of all private providers operate primarily in sub-degree vocational provision and fall largely outside the OfS regulatory framework. The analysis that follows uses the ideal-type framing to illuminate the dominant governance logic of the sector, whilst recognising that this logic operates unevenly and that its limitations are themselves a key finding of the comparative analysis.

#### 5.1.1. Market-Oriented Regulatory Philosophy

The UK private higher education quality assurance system embodies the country's commitment to market mechanisms and consumer protection. Since the establishment of the Office for Students (OfS) in 2017 through the Higher Education and Research Act, students have been explicitly positioned as consumers, education as a service, and quality assurance as primarily a means of protecting consumer rights and maintaining market order. The regulatory framework requires all providers receiving public funding or enrolling students supported by student loans to register with OfS and meet four core conditions: fair access, teaching quality, student protection, and financial sustainability.

However, this market-oriented approach faces fundamental challenges. Tight (2006) identifies a central dilemma: the UK system is caught between pursuing market efficiency whilst maintaining education's public attributes. Private institutions must simultaneously meet regulatory requirements, maintain competitiveness, pursue economic viability, and fulfil social responsibilities—creating a complex field of tensions.

Recent developments have intensified debates about this model's effectiveness. Oliver (2025) argues that OfS faces a fundamental crisis of legitimacy, hampered by unclear goals and insufficient independence from political interference. This critique suggests that market-oriented reforms may have created regulatory confusion rather than clarity. Similarly, Kahl (2025) warns of systemic vulnerabilities in UK higher education governance, identifying a convergence of market fragility, fiscal exposure, and entrenched governance opacity that constitutes a governance crisis. These recent assessments fundamentally challenge the assumption that market mechanisms naturally enhance quality assurance effectiveness, revealing instead that marketisation may have undermined both institutional stability and educational quality.

### 5.1.2. Risk-Based Differentiated Regulation

King (2018) characterises the UK's adoption of risk-based regulation as a 'Regulatory Turn', representing a shift from uniform oversight to differentiated approaches based on institutional risk profiles. Risk assessment encompasses financial status, governance structure, teaching quality, student satisfaction, and historical performance. Institutions are classified into risk categories with corresponding regulatory intensities: low-risk institutions enjoy substantial autonomy with light-touch monitoring; medium-risk institutions face routine regulation including periodic reviews; high-risk institutions experience enhanced scrutiny with frequent inspections and specific improvement requirements.

Whilst the UK's risk-based approach allows for regulatory efficiency, it faces significant methodological challenges. Critically, the Office for Students (OfS) relies on the B3 progression metric, which uses 90% confidence intervals to identify underperformance. Recent statistical critiques suggest this approach is prone to "false positives" (incorrectly flagging acceptable courses) and "false negatives" (missing genuinely problematic provision), thereby undermining the reliability of the data-driven accountability it seeks to enforce. This is further complicated by a reported crisis of legitimacy and insufficient independence within the OfS.

Hunt and Boliver's (2023) analysis reveals critical gaps in this approach. Among 802 private providers surveyed, approximately 50% primarily offer sub-degree vocational courses. These institutions, often small-scale with limited resources, frequently operate outside OfS's regulatory scope as they do not award degrees, creating significant blind spots that threaten both student protection and sector reputation.

Moreover, Areshka and Bradley (2025) raise serious methodological concerns about OfS's progression metrics. Through statistical simulations, they demonstrate that the 90% confidence intervals used in identifying underperforming courses produce both false positives (incorrectly flagging acceptable provision) and false negatives (missing genuinely problematic courses). This statistical critique fundamentally questions the reliability of risk-based regulation when built on potentially flawed metrics. Their findings suggest that current approaches may penalise courses incorrectly whilst failing to identify actual quality problems, undermining the entire premise of data-driven quality assurance.

### 5.1.3. Professional Accreditation's Complex Role

Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) constitute a parallel quality assurance system in UK private higher education. These bodies set professional standards reflecting both academic requirements and industry expectations. For private institutions, professional accreditation provides crucial market differentiation and competitive advantage beyond quality validation.

Maddox-Daines (2021) identifies a crucial distinction: in private institutions, external quality assurers act as 'Arbiters of Standards', enforcing compliance, whilst in traditional universities, external examiners function as 'Critical Friends', providing developmental guidance. This difference reflects deeper structural variations affecting how quality assurance promotes improvement. The professional accreditation system faces challenges including fragmented compliance requirements across multiple bodies, commercialisation pressures potentially compromising independence, and varying international standards complicating transnational education delivery.

## 5.2. China-UK Comparative Analysis

Based on the Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework (CAQAF), this section conducts systematic comparison across four dimensions, revealing not only surface differences but also underlying cultural and institutional logics shaping these divergent approaches.

### 5.2.1. Governance Model: Centralised Coordination versus Dispersed Autonomy

China's "government-led, unified coordination" model contrasts sharply with the UK's "market-driven, institutional autonomy" pattern. The Chinese government, through the Ministry of Education and evaluation centres, conducts comprehensive planning and direct organisation of quality assurance, ensuring uniformity of standards and coordination of evaluation work. This top-down structure reflects collectivist cultural traditions emphasising overall coordination and common development.

The UK's dispersed governance emerged from transformation of traditional academic autonomy to marketised regulation, particularly after OfS's establishment in 2017. McClaran (2018) shows that government primarily acts as regulator rather than direct manager, maintaining market order through baseline requirements and risk regulation whilst leaving specific quality assurance to market mechanisms and professional organisations. Hunt and Boliver (2023) demonstrate that UK private providers enjoy high autonomy in choosing accreditation bodies and implementing improvement strategies.

Buckner (2017) documents that the global expansion of private higher education has been shaped by supranational normative and coercive pressures operating differently across world regions. Building on this, East Asian countries typically maintain strong governmental regulatory capacity rooted in developmental state traditions, whilst Anglo-American systems rely on market mechanisms reflecting liberal intellectual traditions. Each model presents trade-offs: China's approach enables rapid resource mobilisation and uniform reform implementation but may constrain innovation; the UK's stimulates market vitality and diversification but faces regulatory difficulties and quality inconsistencies.

### 5.2.2. Assessment Methods: Standardised Evaluation Versus Differentiated Accreditation

China implements "unified standards, classified guidance, qualitative emphasis" assessment, with all institutions evaluated against unified indicator systems covering operational positioning, faculty, teaching resources, cultivation processes, student development, and quality assurance. Liu and Liu (2017) note that whilst classified guidance considers institutional differences, basic standards and procedures remain unified. Assessment relies primarily on qualitative evaluation through expert judgement, classroom observation, interviews, and material review.

The UK adopts "multiple standards, market choice, data-driven" assessment. Institutions can pursue various quality assurance paths including QAA accreditation, PSRB programme endorsement, or validation through university partnerships. Different bodies apply different standards, creating a diversified pattern. Assessment increasingly relies on quantitative indicators, as exemplified by the Teaching Excellence Framework's use of student satisfaction, employment rates, and learning gain metrics.

These methodological differences reflect divergent epistemologies. China's unified standards embody pursuit of educational equity, with qualitative evaluation respecting educational complexity. Li (2010) argues that whilst subjective, this approach comprehensively grasps quality connotations. The UK's multiple standards reflect market choice ideology, with data-driven approaches embodying positivist influence, though risking 'indicator manipulation' and 'teaching narrowing'. As Vandenberghe and Robin (2004) demonstrate, different methodological approaches to evaluating educational quality – whether parametric or non-parametric – yield divergent results, suggesting that the choice of assessment technique is itself consequential and not merely technical.

### 5.2.3. Improvement Mechanisms: Endogenous Development Versus External Pressure

China's improvement mechanisms emphasise "using evaluation to promote construction, combining internal and external" approaches. The 'Four Promotions' philosophy transforms external evaluation into internal improvement motivation. Liu's (2013) research suggests that genuine improvement occurs only when external requirements align with institutional development needs.

The case institution exemplifies this through its closed-loop mechanism converting evaluation findings into continuous improvement actions.

The UK relies on “market competition, survival of the fittest” mechanisms, with improvement driven primarily by competitive pressure through student choice, rankings, and employer feedback. Hunt and Boliver (2023) show differential impacts across institutions: resource-rich institutions continuously invest in improvement whilst resource-poor ones may enter vicious cycles leading to market exit. Government attempts to mitigate polarisation through risk regulation show limited effectiveness.

Temporal differences are also significant. China’s long evaluation cycles (typically five years) allow deep reform but may reduce responsiveness. Wang (2014) notes this trade-off between thoroughness and agility. The UK’s market-driven improvement demands rapid response, with immediate feedback forcing continuous adjustment, though potentially encouraging short-term behaviours prioritising surface indicators over substantive enhancement.

#### 5.2.4. Stakeholder Engagement: Institutionalised Participation Versus Market Choice

China establishes “government organisation, expert leadership, institutional cooperation, social participation” mechanisms. Cao and Li’s (2014) quality assurance triangle emphasises synergy among government, market, and institutions, though government and expert roles dominate in practice. Evaluation experts, typically senior educators, provide both judgement and improvement guidance. Student participation through teaching evaluation remains limited in influence, with employer engagement primarily indirect.

The UK demonstrates “student-centred, market-oriented, diverse participation” patterns. Students’ consumer status is institutionally confirmed, with the National Student Survey becoming a core quality indicator. Professional bodies and industry organisations play crucial market roles. Tight (2006) notes that whilst this consumer orientation enhances responsiveness, it risks education commodification. Conflicting stakeholder demands—students seeking ease versus employers requiring rigour—create balance challenges.

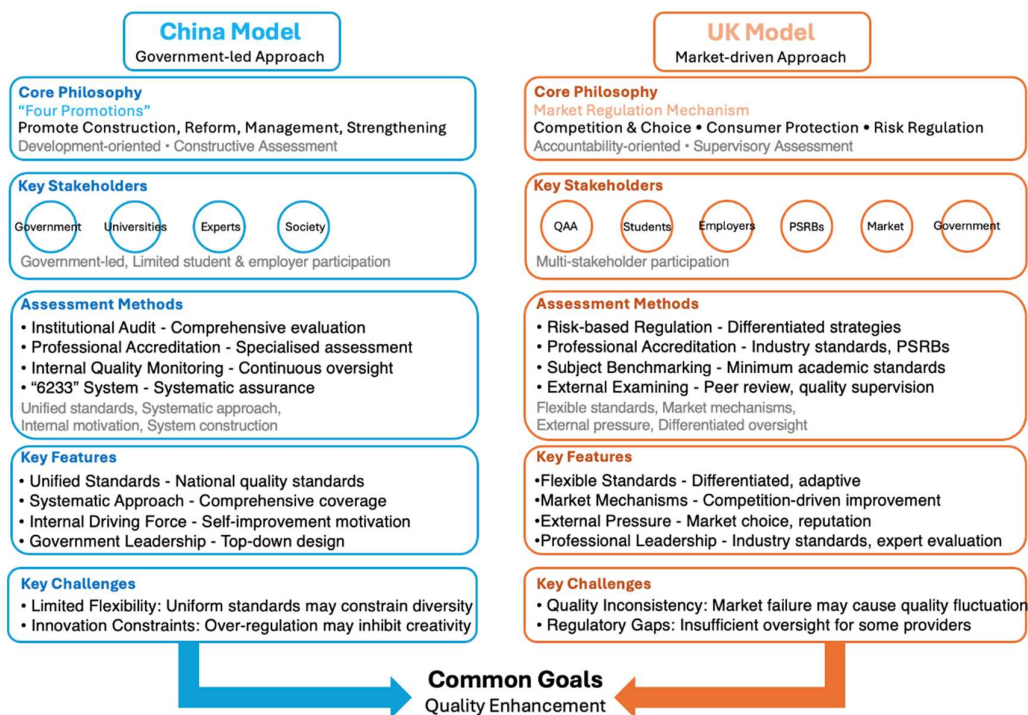
Participation depth varies significantly. Chinese participation shows “deep involvement but limited scope”: experts comprehensively understand institutions and propose specific suggestions, but participation base remains narrow. UK participation exhibits “broad participation but insufficient depth”: information disclosure and market choice enable wider stakeholder involvement, but participation often remains superficial, difficulty penetrating improvement processes.

#### 5.3. Convergence Trends and Framework Integration

The comparative analysis reveals both divergence and convergence in quality assurance approaches. To synthesise these findings, Table 1 presents the key dimensions distinguishing the two models, whilst Figure 3 provides a comprehensive visual framework illustrating their relationship and evolution.

**Table 1.** Key Dimensions of Quality Assurance Systems.

Dimension	China’s ‘Four Promotions’ Model	UK’s Market Model
Governance	Government-led, unified coordination	Market-driven, institutional autonomy
Assessment	Unified standards, qualitative emphasis	Multiple standards, data-driven
Improvement	Internal development, evaluation-driven	External pressure, competition-driven
Participation	Expert-led, institutionalised	Consumer-oriented, market-based
Primary Focus	Developmental enhancement	Accountability and compliance



**Figure 3.** China-UK Private Higher Education Quality Assurance Comparison Framework.

As illustrated in Table 1, these dimensions represent not merely technical differences, but fundamental philosophical divergences rooted in cultural contexts. The Chinese model prioritises collective development and standardised quality assurance, whilst the UK model emphasises individual choice and market differentiation. However, both systems are evolving toward greater balance.

Figure 3 visualises how these models interact within the broader quality assurance landscape. The framework demonstrates that whilst maintaining distinct characteristics, both systems show convergence trends. China increasingly introduces market mechanisms and international standards, with more private universities seeking international accreditation such as AACSB and ABET. Third-party evaluation agencies provide independent perspectives, whilst information disclosure enhances social supervision. These measures improve internationalisation and market recognition whilst maintaining Chinese characteristics.

Similarly, the UK strengthens government coordination despite emphasising market mechanisms. Facing private education market challenges, the government has reinforced baseline regulation, established student protection plans, and explored combining quality assurance with institutional development support, focusing not only on accountability but also capacity building.

This bidirectional convergence reflects universal quality assurance principles. Effective systems require combining internal motivation with external supervision, diverse stakeholder participation, balance between standards and distinctiveness, and continuous innovation responding to environmental changes. As Billing (2004) observed, whilst no universal model exists, all countries seek contextually appropriate best practices.

The convergence trend's deeper motivation lies in renewed recognition of higher education's public attributes. Marginson (2011) argues that higher education generates both private benefits and public value including knowledge innovation, cultural inheritance, and social mobility. Quality assurance serving only private interests erodes higher education's public mission. Therefore, both market-oriented and government-led models must balance public and private benefits.

Through CAQAF framework analysis and visualisation, we conclude that Chinese and UK systems each possess advantages and limitations. Comparison aims not to determine superiority but

to enable mutual learning. Future quality assurance systems must find nationally appropriate balance points between government and market, uniformity and diversity, development and accountability. The evolution of both models toward this balance, whilst maintaining cultural distinctiveness, offers valuable insights for global quality assurance development.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Chinese Case: Outcomes of the 'Four Promotions' Philosophy

The case study analysis reveals measurable improvements across multiple quality dimensions following systematic implementation of the Four Promotions philosophy. In terms of student academic outcomes, the undergraduate graduation thesis sampling pass rate increased from 96.50% in 2023 to 99.80% in 2024. The graduation certificate acquisition rate and degree conferment rate each remained above 99% for three consecutive years, indicating consistent improvements in both minimum quality thresholds and overall student attainment.

Graduate employment outcomes improved substantially. The employment settlement rate increased from 62.38% in 2022 to 84.74% in 2024, a gain achieved against a challenging national employment context. Third-party employer satisfaction surveys report that over 97% of employers rated graduates positively, with particular recognition of practical skills, innovative capacity, and teamwork.

Faculty development indicators show structural improvement. The proportion of faculty holding master's degrees or above increased from 80.22% to 90.80%, and the student-to-teacher ratio improved from 19.26:1 to 18.05:1, approaching the Ministry of Education recommended benchmark. Over five years, 1,409 students were admitted to postgraduate programmes, including 257 to Double First-Class institutions.

Innovation and entrepreneurship education indicators show near-universal participation, with 96.90% of undergraduates engaged in relevant practical activities in 2024. Governance data document the formulation of over 50 teaching management systems and the handling of over 200 teaching violations, indicating active quality monitoring across the 2021–2024 observation period.

### 6.2. UK Case: Regulatory Findings

The secondary analysis of the UK private higher education sector identifies a complex regulatory landscape with significant structural heterogeneity. Hunt and Boliver's (2023) survey of 802 providers identifies four distinct institutional types, with approximately 50% offering sub-degree vocational qualifications largely outside OfS regulatory scope, creating documented gaps in quality oversight.

Areshka and Bradley (2025) demonstrate that the OfS B3 progression metric generates both false positive and false negative classification outcomes, undermining the reliability of risk-based regulation. Oliver (2025) identifies a crisis of regulatory legitimacy at the OfS, whilst Kahl (2025) documents a convergence of market fragility, fiscal exposure, and governance opacity representing systemic risk for the sector.

### 6.3. Comparative Summary Across CAQAF Dimensions

Cross-case comparison across the four CAQAF dimensions — governance model, assessment methods, improvement mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement — is presented in Table 1. The Chinese model demonstrates strength in standardisation, developmental continuity, and measurable outcome improvement, whilst facing constraints related to institutional autonomy and diversity. The UK model demonstrates strength in market responsiveness and provider heterogeneity, whilst facing persistent challenges in baseline quality assurance, regulatory coherence, and equitable access.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1. Cultural Adaptability as a Mediating Variable in QA Effectiveness

The findings from both cases support the central proposition of the CAQAF: that cultural context functions as a mediating variable in quality assurance effectiveness. The improvements documented in the Chinese case appear to be enabled by the alignment between the Four Promotions developmental philosophy and the collectivist institutional culture in which it operates. This alignment facilitates acceptance of centralised coordination and supports the long-term, holistic institutional reform that the case data document. These findings extend Dill and Beerkens' (2010) framework conditions approach by operationalising cultural context as a set of analytically distinct dimensions, providing a more granular instrument than either Billing's (2004) General Model or the framework conditions approach, both of which underspecify the cultural dimension.

### 7.2. The Development–Accountability Balance as a Structural Challenge

The comparative analysis suggests that the tension between developmental and accountability orientations reflects deeper institutional logics rather than mere policy preferences. The Chinese model's emphasis on developmental evaluation has produced documented quality improvements, yet challenges persist in sustaining momentum without commensurate external accountability pressures. Conversely, the UK's accountability-focused model has produced regulatory tools with known methodological limitations and has struggled to ensure baseline quality coverage. This finding is consistent with Wang's (2014) diagnosis of control–accountability–autonomy tensions in Chinese quality assurance, and with Tight's (2006) critique of commodification tendencies in the UK market.

### 7.3. Limitations of the Comparative Design

The methodological asymmetry of this study must be acknowledged explicitly. The Chinese case is analysed through primary empirical data from a single institutional case, whilst the UK case is analysed through secondary literature. This differentiated approach was deliberately adopted (Section 2), but it limits the direct equivalence of the two sides of the comparison. Conclusions about the UK system reflect aggregate patterns in existing literature rather than primary fieldwork. The single-case design also constrains generalisability. Causal claims regarding the Four Promotions philosophy are presented as suggestive: the observed improvements are consistent with the framework's predictions, but alternative explanatory factors — such as broader economic trends or sector-wide improvements in Chinese higher education — cannot be fully excluded.

### 7.4. Implications of CAQAF for Cross-Cultural QA Research and Policy

The CAQAF offers a transferable analytical lens for nations developing culturally appropriate quality assurance frameworks. Its central implication is that neither wholesale adoption of Western market-based models nor uncritical replication of East Asian government-led frameworks is likely to prove effective in contexts where neither set of institutional conditions obtains. Unlike Billing's (2004) framework which assumes universal applicability, or Wang's (2014) which provides contextual analysis without systematic comparative structure, CAQAF combines cultural sensitivity with cross-national comparability. Building on the glocalisation insight of Hayhoe and Zha (2004) and Zha's (2009) global allomorphism framework, it extends these conceptual observations into an operational comparative instrument — which constitutes its principal theoretical contribution.

## 8. Conclusions and Implications

The comparative analysis presented in Sections 6 and 7 demonstrates that quality assurance effectiveness is inextricably linked to cultural adaptability. By synthesising the empirical findings from the Chinese case and the secondary analysis of the UK sector, this section articulates the theoretical contributions of the CAQAF and offers strategic policy recommendations for nations seeking to balance global standards with local institutional realities.

### 8.1. Main Research Findings

Through in-depth analysis and systematic comparison of Chinese and UK private higher education quality assurance systems, this study yields the following main findings:

First, cultural adaptability is the critical mediating variable in quality assurance effectiveness. As the Discussion (Section 7.1) demonstrates, the Chinese and UK models derive their respective strengths and limitations not from technical features of their evaluation procedures, but from the degree to which those procedures are aligned with the cultural and institutional logics of their operating contexts. This finding implies that quality assurance reform must begin with an honest assessment of the cultural preconditions for the proposed mechanisms to function as intended.

Second, balancing development and accountability remains the central structural challenge for both systems. Neither a purely developmental model nor a purely accountability-driven model is sufficient on its own: the former risks lax external accountability, whilst the latter risks producing regulatory tools with methodological limitations and creating quality gaps. Both systems show movement towards greater balance, as discussed in Section 5.3.

Third, effective stakeholder participation is an important guarantee for quality assurance success. Research shows that quality assurance dominated by a single entity often has limitations. The Chinese model needs to further strengthen participation from students, employers, and social organisations, establishing a more open and inclusive quality assurance system. The UK model needs to strengthen government's coordinating role to prevent market failure and regulatory vacuums. Both countries' experiences indicate that establishing quality assurance mechanisms with multi-party participation and collaborative governance from government, market, institutions, and society is an important pathway to improving quality assurance effectiveness.

Fourth, quality assurance systems are undergoing transformation from static to dynamic, from singular to diverse. Traditional quality assurance mainly focuses on achieving static standards, whilst modern quality assurance emphasises dynamic improvement and continuous development. Traditional models mainly rely on single means (such as government evaluation or market regulation), whilst modern models comprehensively use multiple means, including internal assurance, external evaluation, professional accreditation, information disclosure, and risk regulation. This transformation reflects the increasing complexity of the higher education environment and the deepening of quality concepts.

### 8.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions:

First, it constructs the Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework (CAQAF), which advances beyond Billing's (2004) General Model and Dill and Beerkens' (2010) framework conditions approach by operationalising cultural context as a set of analytically distinct, comparable dimensions rather than a background variable. CAQAF does not merely describe variation between systems; it provides a structured instrument for diagnosing the cultural preconditions that determine whether specific QA mechanisms are likely to be effective in a given national context, making it applicable beyond the China-UK comparison as a general analytical tool for cross-cultural quality assurance research.

Second, it systematically explains the theoretical connotations and practical mechanisms of China's 'Four Promotions' quality assurance philosophy. This study examines the 'Four Promotions'

philosophy from an international comparative perspective, revealing its unique value and universal significance, enriching the international quality assurance theoretical system. The developmental assessment thinking embodied in the 'Four Promotions' philosophy provides Eastern wisdom and experience for international quality assurance theory.

Third, it deepens understanding of quality assurance contextuality and dynamism. This study shows that there is no one-size-fits-all best model for quality assurance; rather, adaptive design and dynamic adjustment are needed based on specific cultural backgrounds, institutional environments, and developmental stages. This finding has important implications for developing countries establishing autonomous quality assurance systems.

### *8.3. Policy Recommendations*

Building on the theoretical and empirical findings presented in Sections 6 and 7, the following policy recommendations address the theoretical, policy, and practical dimensions identified by the comparative analysis.

For China, whilst maintaining the core values of the 'Four Promotions' philosophy, the flexibility and inclusivity of the quality assurance system should be enhanced. Specific recommendations include: establishing a classified evaluation system, formulating differentiated evaluation standards and methods based on characteristics of different types of private universities; expanding stakeholder participation, particularly strengthening the role of student participation and employer feedback in quality assurance; promoting internationalisation of professional accreditation, encouraging qualified programmes to seek international accreditation to enhance international recognition; strengthening information disclosure mechanisms, establishing unified quality information release platforms to enhance transparency and credibility of quality assurance; cultivating quality culture, internalising quality consciousness as a core element of institutional culture, achieving transformation from external promotion to endogenous development.

For the UK, whilst maintaining market vitality, the public nature and developmental aspects of quality assurance should be strengthened. Specific recommendations include: improving risk warning mechanisms, establishing more precise and timely risk identification systems to prevent sudden institutional closures from harming students; strengthening baseline regulation, ensuring all private education institutions meet basic quality standards to protect students' basic rights; focusing on developmental support, not only focusing on accountability and compliance but also providing guidance and support for institutional development, particularly for small and medium-sized institutions; promoting fair access, taking measures to ensure different social groups can obtain quality educational opportunities; strengthening coordination mechanisms, enhancing coordination between different regulatory bodies to avoid regulatory overlap or vacuums.

### *8.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions*

In addition to the methodological limitations discussed in Section 7.3 – particularly the asymmetry between the primary case study approach used for the Chinese case and the secondary literature approach used for the UK case, and the constraints this places on direct comparative equivalence – this study has the following further limitations that should be acknowledged explicitly.

This study has the following limitations: limited representativeness of case selection, with only one Chinese private university selected for in-depth analysis; future research should expand the sample range to include different types of private higher education institutions from different regions. Data type limitations, mainly relying on cross-sectional data and literature materials, lacking longitudinal tracking data, making it difficult to fully reflect the dynamic evolution of quality assurance systems. Comparative dimension limitations, mainly focusing on China and the UK; future studies could expand to more countries, particularly other developing and transitional countries.

Future research could deepen and expand in the following directions: conducting large-scale empirical research, collecting more stakeholder perspectives and experiences; conducting

longitudinal tracking studies, observing long-term effects and evolutionary trends of quality assurance systems; exploring the impact of digital technology on quality assurance, studying how new technologies like big data and artificial intelligence change quality assurance concepts and practices; researching international cooperation mechanisms for quality assurance in the context of globalisation, exploring how to promote international mutual recognition of quality standards whilst maintaining cultural diversity; deepening research on quality culture, exploring how to cultivate and develop quality culture under different cultural backgrounds.

### 8.5. Concluding Remarks

This study has demonstrated that quality assurance effectiveness is inextricably linked to cultural and institutional context. The Chinese 'Four Promotions' model and the UK's market model represent distinct but internally coherent governance logics, each producing measurable outcomes that reflect – and are constrained by – the wider systems in which they operate. The comparative analysis does not reveal the superiority of either model, but rather the conditions under which each performs well and the directions in which each must develop.

The CAQAF developed in this study offers a replicable analytical instrument for nations seeking to develop quality assurance systems that are both globally connected and locally grounded. For developing and transitional countries, the framework's central implication is neither to reject international quality standards nor to transplant them wholesale, but to assess carefully the alignment between proposed mechanisms and the cultural and institutional preconditions in their own contexts. Quality assurance ultimately serves one purpose: ensuring that students receive education of genuine quality. As higher education continues to globalise, the capacity to develop frameworks that honour this purpose whilst remaining culturally grounded will be an increasingly important dimension of educational governance.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi; Methodology, Yitong Liu; Validation, Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi; Formal analysis, Yitong Liu; Investigation, Yitong Liu; Resources, Yitong Liu; Data curation, Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi; Writing – original draft, Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi; Writing – review & editing, Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi; Supervision, Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi.

**Funding:** The study was supported by the Research Start-up Funding Project for High-level Talents of Weifang University of Science and Technology (Grant No. KJRC2020012) and the Youth Innovation and Technology Support Program of Shandong Provincial Higher Education Institutions (Grant No. 2024KJH156).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Weifang University of Science and Technology (WUST-IRB2025, 16 July 2023).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all faculty members, administrators, and staff at the case institution who generously gave their time to participate in interviews and contributed institutional data, without whose openness and commitment to quality improvement this research would not have been possible.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest.

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CAQAF	Culturally Adaptive Quality Assurance Framework
OfS	Office for Students
PHE	Private higher education

PSRBs	Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency

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