From External Accountability to Potential-Oriented Development: Quality Assurance System Building for Teacher Preparation in China

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Abstract

Purpose: From the perspective of performance standards-based teacher education, this article aimed to address progress and challenges of China’s teacher preparation quality assurance system.

Design/Approach/Methods: This review is based on policy review and case studies. Retrieving to the existing research literature, this research sorted out the policies related to the quality assurance system for university-based teacher preparation in China. Furthermore, this research selected teacher preparation programs from five cases of teacher education colleges of varied levels and used interviews to analyze their attitudes and measures.

Findings: The analysis reveals that the quality system for university-based teacher preparation in China’s educational institutions has gone through two main stages: the building stage and the
improvement stage. The internal policy tension in China’s teacher preparation quality assurance system is primarily centralized in the dissociation among and segmentation between the relevant standards for teacher education. There is a distinction between “soft” and “hard” policy standards, and reforming the teacher certification testing system also brings a test-oriented bias and a separation of evaluation from education. Institutions of higher education are expected to follow the path of potential-oriented development and concentrate on cooperative partnerships between local communities and schools so as to nurture innovative, professional future educators with high quality.

**Originality/Value:** This article provides a comprehensive and detailed policy analysis as well as empirical evidence for the quality assurance system for university-based teacher preparation in China.

**Keywords**
Diversified accountability, policy community, potential-oriented development, standardized teacher education, teacher professionalization

Date received: 20 January 2019; accepted: 8 May 2019

**Introduction**

... Where teachers are not commonly removed for unsatisfactory performance, the quality of teachers depends mainly on setting high standards of entering teacher-preparation programs, on the quality of their initial preparation, and on the attention given to the quality of their preparation following their initial induction.

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012, p. 68)

A good education depends on good teachers, and good teachers depend on high-quality teacher preparation. As the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MOE) noted in its 2010 *Outline for China’s national plan for medium and long-term education reform and development (2010–2020)*, “Education is a great work, and educators are its foundation. Only when we have good educators can we have good education” (p. 19). In this 21st century with its knowledge economy and information technology, China needs to continue to raise the quality of its own teacher preparation in order to gain the advantage in talent training and in the competition for overall national power. The OECD report *Preparing teachers and developing school leaders for the 21st century: Lessons from around the world* points out that the countries of the world today must all consider “What teacher preparation programs are needed to prepare graduates who are ready to teach well in a 21st-century classroom” (OECD, 2012, p. 52).

In the past 20 years, in order to raise the quality of teacher preparation, the Chinese government and teacher training colleges and universities have all been working steadily to
improve teacher education. On the one hand, the Chinese government has been putting forward laws and regulations driving improvement in the teacher education institution and its framework, including the State Council’s decision on reforms and development of basic education, the Outline for China’s national plan for medium- and long-term education reform and development (2010–2020), Teacher education curriculum standards (trial version), Professional standards for preschool, elementary, middle school, and special education teachers (trial version), Temporary measures for middle and primary school teacher certification examinations, Measures to implement certification for teaching-related professions at ordinary institutions of higher education (provisional version), and Action plan for revitalizing teacher education (2018–2022) (MOE, 2018).

It has been until the late 1990s when China gradually realized an upgrading of its “three old tiers” in education (polytechnic, specialized vocational, and bachelor’s) to “three new tiers” (specialized vocational, bachelor’s, and master’s). Teacher education moved toward being more open, more universalized, and more comprehensive (Shen, 2008, p. 11). However, even though China now has already been involved in the deepening of teacher education reform (Li, 2015), there is still discrepancy in the quality of the educators being trained by institutions of higher education, as well as a low rate of successful employment (Han, Peng, Liang, & Zhong, 2017; Lin, Yu, & Wu, 2011). In some cases, the teachers being trained at traditional teachers’ colleges actually fail to meet the basic requirements for teaching at middle and elementary schools. Gu (2015) once criticized “What are the consequences of these reforms? To put it somewhat extremely—or radically—they have crippled the normal education system and lowered the level of professionalization in teaching, with elementary school teachers suffering the gravest losses” (p. 13).

With the need for high-quality teachers and teacher education reform ongoing, the Chinese government and relevant educational institutions are constantly adjusting and reorganizing teacher preparation in many ways to improve quality, each taking on the responsibility within its own dominion and each facing pressure from and encumbered by interaction with the other. This article explores, from the standpoint of performance standards-based teacher education, three questions in policy and practice are to be addressed:

1. What progress is being made in China’s development and transformation of its teacher preparation quality assurance system? What changes are being made in the accountability subjects?
2. What challenges are currently being faced in policy and implementation of China’s teacher preparation quality assurance system?
3. How can we, through potential-oriented development of teacher preparation, address the challenge of quality assurance and accountability?
Performance standards-based teacher education

Performance standards-based teacher education was developed from teacher professionalization, New Managerialism, and constructivist learning theory in the latter part of the 20th century. It was especially influenced by standards-based education reform in the U.S. Since the International Labor Organization and UNESCO published *Recommendation concerning the status of teachers* in 1966, teachers have everywhere increasingly been viewed as professionals (Gu, 2015; Liu, 2004). Accordingly, many countries have provided requirements concerning the knowledge, abilities, or competency that teachers should acquire. Various regulations have been proposed from such a standardization context. Though it encompasses economic, efficiency, and efficacy goals, New Managerialism, also called New Public Management, has at its core taking the management systems and management techniques of private enterprise and applying them to public service, emphasizing government usage of market to manage public affairs, changing the government’s management function from oarsman to helmsman (Chai, 2000; Fang & Chen, 2013; Li, 2004, p. 10; Xu, 2016). In the context of teacher education systems, it manifested that government has been bringing market forces into the entire teacher training process, from initial teacher preparation to induction to ongoing professional development, and using policy to regulate and control authority and to apportion control among relevant teacher education institutions.

In teacher education, the constructivist theory of learning has mainly influenced the content of standards and the selection of teaching methodologies. Standardized teacher education plans or regulations directed by this theory suppose that teachers can make professional decisions according to student circumstances and that they have the ability to reflect and make professional judgments (Chen, 2007). The focus of “standards-based education reform” is unifying the various phases of the educational system based on the foundation of basic education curriculum standards, including teacher preparation and training, basic pedagogy, the creation of teaching materials, performance evaluation, and examination. Standards are also used as a means to control the quality of education, with the area of focus shifting from “education inputs” to “education outputs” (Chen, 2003). From this, we can see that teacher education, as one part of education reform, must be integrated into the whole standardized education system, and attention must be given to the resulting output: just what level of quality do the future teachers being educated out of this system have, especially in the preservice education stage?

Since the 1990s, performance standards-based teacher education has already become a common topic of discussion in many countries with regard to preparing teachers of high quality and strong character. Countries like those in the European Union and the U.S., the United Kingdom, Singapore, Canada, and Australia have all built up institutions or organizations for teacher education, published teacher education standards, and reformed teacher education curricula. A few examples
What matters most: Teaching for America’s future of 1996 and Doing what matters: Investing in teaching of 1997, both published by the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future, which unveiled a focus on quality-oriented education in teacher education reform and emphasized the establishment of a standards-based teacher professionalization course through the coordination of national policy and the education administrative departments of individual states (Darling-Hammond, 2000, pp. 167–168; Huang, 2013, p. 31). Looking at the overall global trend, countries are moving toward setting professional standards and developing professional abilities, not only detailing what is meant by expertise for teachers, but also highlighting actions for controlling that expertise (Yang & Huang, 2011).

Performance standards-based teacher education refers to teacher education based on or driven by standards, with standards being the basis or driving force of teacher education; the curricula, the texts, the teaching methods, and the assessment are all in keeping with the standards, the goal being to meet or exceed them. (Valli & Rennert-Arivs, 2002, pp. 203–207)

With this definition, teacher education curricula, the application of instructional processes, and teacher education assessment must all be regulated based on teacher education standards, or we could say that having overall teacher education standards comes first, with other derivative standards coming later. However, a look at teacher education practice in many countries reveals that standards-based teacher education focuses more on the preservice education stage (Chen, 2007), or in other words, standards for the preservice education stage are more integrated than those for in-service education. At the same time, few countries establish teacher training standards before setting other standards; the great majority continually add new or revise previously published standards. Sykes and Plastrik (1993) classified standards-based education reform according to the method and domain of application of standards into the systemic reform model, the professional model, and the reform network model.

Looking at the current level of development in teacher professionalization, the second model is used most in teacher preparation, and the focus is on professional courses for teachers, including standards of institutional accreditation, licensure, and advanced certification (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Sykes & Plastrik, 1993). Apart from this, standards-based teacher education has been consistent, practical, and systematic (Chen, 2007).

In 2001, China published the State Council’s decision on reforms and development of basic education, which for the first time brought up the concept of “teacher education,” replacing the “pedagogical education” of years prior. Since then, China began building “an open teacher education system centered around pedagogical colleges and universities with the participation of other schools of higher education, together with training and preparation” (MOE, 2001b). So far, in the process of furthering teacher education reform and continuing the professionalization of teacher
education, the Chinese government issued a number of successive policies and regulations dealing with qualifications and professional standards for teachers, standards for teacher education curricula, and standards for accreditation of teacher education institutions (see Table 1). The progress of standardization has obviously already begun for teacher education in China, and the field already possesses standards for accreditation of the institutions, certification, and curriculum. To sum up, in this worldwide “battle for teacher quality” while the standardization of teacher education continues, China is already well on the way and has already completed construction of a system of basic standards for teacher education. The government is attempting to complete a top-down design for teacher education (Wang & Zhu, 2018; Zhao, 2012; Zhu, 2018), and a standardized teacher preparation framework has already been established.

**Research methods**

This article uses literature review and case studies to analyze the system of accountability for the quality of teacher preparation at China’s institutions of higher learning. Teacher education at colleges and
universities being in China a higher education profession, and the establishment of quality higher education in China currently using a primarily government-led model (Zhang, 2012), in looking at research literature, this article will on the one hand consider teacher education at colleges and universities to be a part of the higher education system and use policies related to the field of teacher education research to sort out issues in teacher preparation at Chinese colleges and universities in terms of quality accountability and improvement. With teacher education being standardized in this way, these policies are in parallel with, not against, the content of teacher education standardization, and this is especially apparent in China’s teacher preparation quality assurance system and teacher accreditation system.

From the practical perspective, this research will analyze the reactions and measures taken by several of China’s policy-directed higher education institutions and discuss how they might develop in the future. Because each time when a new policy is issued in the teacher education field, some colleges or universities immediately adjusted their curriculum design or draw up new plans to address it. Whatever stance they adopt and whatever teacher preparation effects they see in facing one teacher education policy transformation after another, we can to some extent see how these “passive” institutions are wearily responding to changes.

Moreover, this research will select teacher preparation programs from five cases of teacher education colleges of varying levels. Mainly using interviews, this research aims to understand how these institutions and their programs put teacher preparation quality assurance systems into practice, as well as how they realize potential-oriented development in teacher education (Liu, 2016; MOE, 2017; Shao, 2018).

Transformations in teacher preparation quality assurance systems in China’s colleges and universities

Quality assurance for teacher preparation in China’s colleges and universities is currently supported by the quality assurance systems of the colleges and universities themselves. As described earlier, the government through the establishment of teacher education standards has built a certain external environment for those institutions of participating in teacher preparation. The policy environment they face and the basis for development have a paramount relationship to the transformation of China’s institutions of higher learning and teacher education in the last 30 years, with the year 1999 a turning point.

In 1998, the MOE published the Higher Education Law of the People’s Republic of China, A plan of action for the revitalization of education in the 21st century, and other documents, and in 1999, colleges and universities across the nation officially began to increase recruitment. In the same year, the MOE published the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council’s decision on the deepening of educational reform and comprehensively promoting quality-oriented education, which distinctly introduced “encouraging universities and non-normal institutions of higher education to participate in the training and preparation of middle and
elementary school teachers” (MOE, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). One clear result of increasing college and university recruitment was to promote the massification of higher education in China and make it more common: in 1998, China’s gross higher education enrollment rate was 9.8%, but in 2002, it had breached 15%, and by 2017, it was already 88.3% (Li, 2013, p. 46; National Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Zhang, 2007, p. 1). As higher education became more universal in China, the reorganization of teacher education institutions directly drove universalization, opening-up, and diversification of teacher education (Gu, 2015; Qie, 2004; Tan & Zhang, 2008).

Teacher education reform in China is highly dependent on reform of the higher education system. Changes to the quality assurance system brought by higher education system reform not only determine the key chord of the teacher preparation quality assurance system, but both types of reform are advancing in parallel. In the course of this progress, the government is constantly adjusting its roles, setting the baseline for professional teachers, and supervising and encouraging institutions participating in teacher preparation to find their own path of development.

**Building a quality assurance system and the shared responsibility of government and normal universities**

In 1985, the National Education Commission of the People’s Republic of China (NEC) introduced the *Notice on launching research and pilot work to assess higher engineering education*, marking the beginning of work to assess higher education in China (Chen, 2015). Soon after in 1990, *Interim provisions on education assessment in ordinary colleges and universities* became China’s first administrative regulation for the administration of higher education assessment (NEC, 1990), setting off a new round of prioritized construction in higher education and subsequently beginning a targeted evaluation of teaching work at institutions of higher learning of various grades. The NEC initiated qualification assessment in 1994, excellence assessment in 1996, and random standards assessment in 1999 (Liu, 2018).

Since the reform and opening up, in order to address the urgent need for more teachers in primary education, China reinstituted the independent, directed, and closed three-tier (normal universities, junior normal schools, and secondary normal schools) normal education system it had originally set up after the People’s Republic of China was founded. The entire country used the same unified teacher education curriculum (Wan, 2018), centered on the “old three courses” of pedagogy, psychology, and subject pedagogy (Hou, 2014). In 1990s, with the development of a market economy and the reform of basic education, the unified teaching plan and curriculum used to train identical teachers gradually began to fall short of the needs for high-quality, high-level teachers (Huo, 2018; Wan, 2018). Normal education also suffered enough from societal and academic castigation of its archaic content, old-fashioned methods, and unvarying models (Gu, Hu, & Mi, 2005, p. 154). The government therefore began to gradually adjust the structure and
ranking of normal colleges and universities and gave a certain level of autonomy to related educational institutions, beginning with the curriculum of the teachers’ colleges. For example, secondary normal schools would merge with or into other colleges or universities of higher levels (Huo, 2018, p. 58). And the NEC in 1986 published its *Opinions on strengthening and developing normal education*, which for the first time suggested that teachers’ colleges and universities could—with reason—adjust specializations and pedagogical plans (Wan, 2018, p. 28).

Meanwhile, national-level promotion of quality assurance was beginning primarily with a teacher qualification system. Before the middle of the 1990s, the teachers graduated from China’s closed teacher education framework were all assigned to specific positions, their jobs directly arranged. In 1995, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China promulgated its first *Regulations on the qualifications of teachers*, which stipulated outright “Chinese citizens at all levels and types of schools and other educational institutions who expressly engage in teaching and educational work should obtain teacher accreditation according to the law” (MOE, 1995). Those who had been through teacher preparation would obtain teaching credentials directly upon graduation, while those who had not would have to take the standardized teacher qualification exam; in other words, “only people who were not students of teachers’ colleges or who were ordinary citizens would need to be tested on pedagogy, psychology, and similar curriculum knowledge; this exam was compensatory by nature” (Jiang, 2007, p. 35). With the establishment of diversified teacher education preparation institutions in the beginning of the 21st century, the MOE in 2000 and 2001 successively put forward measures for implementing *Regulations on the qualifications of teachers* and *Notice from the MOE on the promulgation of “Opinions on some issues with initial recognition of teacher qualification work.”* China set up an admission and management system for teachers featuring “national standards, provincial examinations, county employment, and school usage” (Liu, 2017; Luo & Zheng, 2017). Then, teacher credentials were given by teachers’ colleges or local departments in charge of educational administration (MOE, 2000, 2001a; Zeng & Kang, 2016).

Overall, before the turn of the century, ordinary higher education assessment in China did not really apply to the quality of teacher education training programs. Training quality of teachers was primarily dependent on the government and teachers’ colleges and universities (Fang, 2011, p. 145; Gu, Hu, & Mi, 2005, p. 154; Liu, 2018). On the government side, this was because the external, top-down teacher education framework it built was no longer suitable, while the teachers’ colleges share of the responsibility came from the low level of sophistication of its internal apparatus for training educators, including the setting of goals, curriculum design, training processes, teaching systems, and more (Gu et al., 2005, p. 154; Liu, 2014, pp. 9–10). It is worth noting that the curriculum arrangements for internal quality assurance at that time were frequently called into question; even looking just at the early 1990s, some teachers’ colleges greatly increased their pedagogical curriculum offerings to include teaching-skill courses like handwriting and speaking,
administering a class, modern pedagogical techniques, and so on (Jin, 1996, pp. 52–53). But by the end of the 1990s, many teachers’ colleges and universities had again reverted to the dominant condition of disciplinary specialization as directed under discipline-centered theory, and a major in teacher education lost its fundamental distinction from the training programs in use at humanities, sciences, engineering, vocational, or agricultural colleges and universities. (Zhang, Qin, & Lu, 2013, p. 52)

**Optimization stage for quality assurance systems and diversified accountability**

_Teacher preparation quality assurance within the undergraduate teaching evaluation system in colleges and universities_

China’s current higher education quality assurance system was built from the undergraduate teaching assessment mechanism (Chen, 2015), which was implemented by the Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education from August 2004. Upon entering the 21st century, the scale of college and university students rapidly increased, leading to public concern about quality deterioration of college and university education (Liu, 2018). To address this, the country issued _Some opinions on the work to strengthen undergraduate instruction at institutions of higher education to raise educational quality_ in 2001 (MOE, 2001c), _Plan for assessment of undergraduate instruction at ordinary colleges and universities (trial version)_ in 2004 (MOE, 2004), and other administrative regulations. In that same year, a system for quinquennial assessment of undergraduate instruction at ordinary colleges and universities was formally implemented (Chen, 2015; Liu, 2018). However, in the results of the actual assessment that followed, many scholars criticized the emphasis on results and understatement of the process, the neglect of the original intention of assessment, the existence of fraud or deception, and even a utilitarian tendency (Fang, 2011, p. 147; Zhou & Liu, 2005, p. 12). In consideration of these problems, the MOE in 2011 published the _MOE opinion on work in evaluation of undergraduate teaching in ordinary colleges and universities_ and _Methods for implementation of qualified evaluation of undergraduate teaching work in ordinary colleges and universities_, and China has since built a “Five in One” higher education quality assurance system with government direction of relatively independent and diverse participating institutions (see Table 2), a higher education quality assessment system where the “key content is institutional evaluation, professional accreditation and evaluation, international evaluation and regular monitoring of data on normal teaching status, with a foundation of self-evaluation by the institution” (Liu, 2018, p. 13; MOE, 2011b, 2011c).

And so, China has slowly established a quality assurance system with internal and external mechanisms listed in Table 2. In 2015, the MOE published Opinions on furthering the separation of
government administration, school management, and educational evaluation and advancing a transformation of government function in order to advance the overall reform divorcing administration, management, and evaluation in the field of education (Shao, 2018). We can see in Figure 1 that with this separation, a single entity would no longer be solely accountable for the quality of higher education but rather multiple bodies of macro and medium scale on several levels.

### Table 2. Chinese higher education quality assessment system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional self-evaluation</td>
<td>Higher education institutions engage in evaluation of their colleges and departments, disciplinary majors, curriculum, and other areas based on goals for cultivating talent and adherence to educational requirements, teaching processes, and results. Special attention is paid to teacher and student evaluation of educational work, evaluation of student learning efficacy and the efficient utilization of educational resources, and workplace evaluation of how well employees have been prepared. Institutions are required to prepare an annual report of undergraduate teaching quality for the reference of the national government and related specialty institutions in their important work of evaluating colleges, universities, and professions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional evaluation</td>
<td>1. Eligibility evaluation for undergraduate institutions newly established since 2000 that have not participated in educational work evaluation. Major areas of evaluation are the infrastructure conditions, teaching management and internal quality assurance mechanism, capacity to serve local economic and societal development and to train talent. Evaluation results are categorized as “Passed,” “Deferred,” and “Failed,” following implementation of 2012’s evaluation criteria for undergraduate teaching work accreditation at ordinary institutions of higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Auditing of ordinary undergraduate institutions that have already undergone and passed higher learning institution evaluations. Every 5 years, a report describing actual conditions must be prepared to facilitate “indirectly inspection of the setup, operation, and effectiveness of the institution’s internal quality assurance mechanism” (Chang, 2013, p. 75).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional accreditation and evaluation</td>
<td>Promotion of professional accreditation in line with national standards for engineering, medical, and other fields. Professional accreditation is currently concentrated among fields of engineering, medicine, and some business fields (Li, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International evaluation</td>
<td>Conducted by high-level global experts in professional fields, or third-party evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular monitoring of data on regular teaching status</td>
<td>A national data platform for monitoring higher education quality is used to collect basic data to reflect teaching conditions through information technology.</td>
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</table>
As a result, with a higher education quality assurance system centered on “undergraduate teaching evaluation,” all colleges and universities with teacher training majors have been included, and they must undergo the related evaluation and perform self-assessment. Especially since the specific establishment of accreditation for teaching programs in ordinary colleges and universities, teacher education colleges and universities must also get specific accreditation for teaching-related programs. On the “regular monitoring of data on regular teaching status” dimension, the User operating instructions for the national data platform for regular quality monitoring in higher education in 2018 has required to collect the following data about the teaching programs as given in Table 3.

Quality assurance for teacher preparation in the teacher education standards system

Since the year 2000, the MOE has brought out several policies and statutes relating to teacher education standards (see Table 1), key among these being certification standards for teaching-related programs, teacher education curriculum standards, standards for teaching professions, and a teacher qualification system.
1. Regulations on the qualifications of teachers (1995) and Method for implementation (2000). To put those Teachers Law provisions relevant to the teaching qualification system into effect, in 1995, the State Council promulgated Regulations on the qualifications of teachers (hereafter Regulations), an act which signified the formal establishment of a teaching qualification certificate system in China. The system features seven types of teaching qualification and specifies the requirements for each, along with procedures for examination and accreditation. In September 2009, following on the Teachers Law and Regulations, the MOE put forward Methods for implementing “Regulations on the qualifications of teachers.” Together with the Teachers Law requirement that the “nation should implement a teacher qualification system” and the plan for implementing a teacher qualification system set out in the Regulations, this resulted in a complete set of regulations for a national teacher certification system. The Regulations established principles for a macro framework for implementing laws and regulations for a teacher accreditation system, while using the guiding idea and design for a general framework established by the two earlier regulations. Methods for implementing drew up procedures and methods for full implementation of the teacher certification system; principles, guiding ideology, and procedures and methods have built up a regulatory system for teacher certification.

2. Teacher education curriculum standards (trial version) (2011a). A professional team of specialists expressly set up by the MOE through 7 years of preparation eventually “raised

<table>
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<th><strong>Table 3.</strong> Data to be collected on teaching-related programs.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers responsible for directing student growth and development;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher education research and reform programs;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher-managed research programs in elementary education fields;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher-edited teaching materials for primary education curriculum;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary education service record for teachers in the past 5 years;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure for teaching-related programs;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching facilities for teaching-related programs;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training conditions for teaching-related programs;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher education curriculum;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical curriculum;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching practice;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-undergraduate students in teaching-related programs;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentive awards for pedagogical skills competitions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduating students and graduates in teaching-related programs.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Compiled by the author from user operating instructions for the national data platform for regular quality monitoring in higher education.
a high-quality professional team of teachers to regulate and lead teacher education curriculum and pedagogy” (MOE, 2011a). This standard advocates three fundamental concepts—“rooted in cultivating people, directed at practice, for a lifetime of learning”—and sets regulations for curriculum goals and curriculum requisites for kindergarten, elementary, and middle school initial teacher preparation and for continuing teacher education.

3. The 2012 Professional standards for teachers (trial version) series, including the Professional standards for preschool teachers (trial version), Professional standards for primary school teachers (trial version), and Professional standards for middle school teachers (trial version) from the MOE in 2012, and professional standards for secondary vocational school and special education teachers in 2013 and 2015. The fundamental ideas expressed in these regulations—“priority on teacher virtue, student-grounded, ability-focused, lifelong learning”—constitute the country’s “basic requirement for qualified teachers with professional character, a fundamental norm for the behavior of teachers carrying out educational work, a basic criterion for guiding professional teacher development, and an important basis for the work of teacher preparation, admission, training, and assessment” (MOE, 2012).

4. Measures to implement certification for teaching-related majors in ordinary institutions of higher education (provisional version) (2017) implement three grades of monitoring certification for teaching-related programs in ordinary colleges and universities: monitoring of basic conditions, certification that teaching quality meets standards, and certification of teaching quality exceeding standards (see Figure 2). All colleges and universities training teachers must pass the first grade, using big data to “implement monitoring of the operating status in various locations offering teaching-related programs.” To put together China’s current teacher preparation standards in Figure 3, the quality of teacher preparation was governed by three sets of standards, which are inconsistent in either internal framework or contents. Professional standards for teachers should guide teacher preparation from beginning to end, as well as being the foundation for ongoing teacher professional development (Zhang, 2017), but in reality there is no uniformity in either internal framework or content of them.

**Challenges facing university-based teacher preparation quality assurance system**

Through undergraduate teaching assessment and the introduction of a series of teacher education standards, China has established a university-based teacher preparation quality assurance system as aforementioned. But the gap between policy and practice has created a few challenges for the current teacher preparation quality assurance system.
Policy tensions within the teacher preparation quality assurance system

Policy tensions in the teacher preparation quality assurance system are focused on the “dissociation” and “segmentation” among teacher education standards (Zhang, 2017). Table 4 compares the structure of the four types of teacher education standards already introduced. By content and composition, Zhang noted (2017) “if we closely examine the related content of the standards for certification in teaching professions, the standards for teacher qualification, and the standards for the teaching specialization, we see obvious dissociation among and segmentation between them” (p. 42).

The crux of the problem arises from “professionalization of teachers” itself: China’s professional standard for teachers as a “pointer” for the core professionalization of teaching in fact

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**Figure 2.** Three grades of monitoring certification for teaching-related majors in China and corresponding autonomy of teachers’ qualification examination.

**Figure 3.** Related standards for quality of teacher preparation in China.
determines “who a teacher is,” and it should systematize other standards and be an important metric for the construction of a teacher credential evaluation system (Anonymous, 2012; Yan, 2015, p. 15). But one research points to the existence of an inconsistency between the name and the actual content; relatively few metrics, fields, and basic requirements; the setting of teacher professionalism as the minimum requirement; the failure to use action verbs to describe basic requirements; and items point to “teaching” but not to “learning,” while the content is “all-encompassing,” among other problems. (Li, 2012, p. 31)

### Tensions in practice

The different practical pathways. As differing standards for a teacher preparation quality assurance system came to pass, a case survey of five higher education institutions identified an obvious

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional concepts and teaching ethics</td>
<td>Following teaching ethics</td>
<td>Education convictions and responsibilities</td>
<td>Professional ethics, educational concepts (written exam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional knowledge</td>
<td>Grasp of pedagogy</td>
<td>Educational knowledge and ability</td>
<td>Educational concepts, professional ethics, knowledge of laws and regulations, scientific and cultural accomplishment, reading comprehension, linguistic expression, logical deduction, information processing and other basic skills; education and teaching, student guidance and basic knowledge of class management; basic knowledge of aspiring pedagogical field, knowledge and methods for educational design, implementation, and evaluation; ability to apply course knowledge to analyze and resolve education and teaching problems in the real classroom (written exam)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Table 4. Comparison of China’s teacher education standards.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional ability</th>
<th>Mastery of education</th>
<th>Education practice and experience</th>
<th>Foundational teaching character + foundational teaching skills (interview)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
distinction between “soft standards” and “hard standards.” An administrator in a local normal university in one province pointed out:

Even though the country rolled out Professional standards and Curriculum standards, for us the most important thing is still the teaching certification exam because right now normal students also have to pass the exam before they can get their certifications. But now there is also Certification standards for teaching-related majors; we take that seriously, too.

A university director of the teaching program in a local comprehensive university was even more direct:

Our current curriculum offering is based on Teacher education curriculum standards, but in terms of the content of the curriculum, we are still aiming to cover all the content of the qualifying exam. It is important to the students. We’re now requiring our teachers to go through their question pools to make sure they thoroughly permeate their teaching.

The other two institutions in our case study (excluding one normal university affiliated to a ministry) used measures or practices similar to these, viewing Professional standards for teachers and teacher education curriculum standards as “soft” policies only meant to guide, and more actively implementing the “hard” policies of the teaching qualification exam and Standards for certification of teaching-related programs.

**Debate over reform of the teacher qualification exam.** Around 2010, the quality of teachers produced by some colleges and universities came increasingly into question in China, especially by non-normal institutions of higher education. At the same time, the government hoped to attract more talented individuals from universities and colleges to enter teaching (Chen, 2015; Lin et al., 2011; Yang, 2017). Beginning in 2011, the government initiated a unified teacher qualification exam system in a series of pilot localities such as Zhejiang province and Hubei province (Chen, 2015; Dang, 2016; Yan, 2015), changing the policy of the past that allowed students in teaching programs to be directly certified as qualified teachers, requiring them to take the qualifying exam together with students in other majors and only after passing allowing them to become certified as qualified teachers.

In 2015, the MOE introduced General Office of the MOE notice on expanding experimental reform of the regular qualifying examination and registration system for middle and primary school teachers, officially setting up a national examination system for teacher qualification in China. Therefore, the passing rate for the teacher qualification exam has become a yardstick for measuring the teacher training quality of related institutions, even to determine whether a teachers’ college could survive or not (Bian, 2017; Chen, 2015; Luo, 2017). Before the national exam was implemented, the passing rate for the teacher qualifying exam was generally 70% or greater, but after implementing a unified exam the pass rate plummeted to 27.5% (Chen, 2017).
However, since the implementation of a uniform nationwide teacher qualification exam, great controversy has arisen in Chinese academia over it. For instance, over the rationality of this method of assessment, a Chinese journal of Education and Teaching Research organized a written forum to discuss “Can the national qualifying exam prepare a workforce of high-quality teachers?” At the same time, with the “separation of teaching and testing” (Zeng & Kang, 2016) and a national teacher qualification exam, many scholars have expressed strong concerns about its deconstructive effects on teacher education curriculum, for example, marginalizing teacher education or teaching for test (Chen, 2015; Lin & Liu, 2015; Pan, 2017). As reflected in practice, some schools and colleges adopted a strategy to “merge classes and examination” (Wang & Liu, 2018; Xu, 2017). In the extreme cases, some local teacher colleges limited their course offering to “pedagogy, psychology and other exam courses required in teacher qualification” (Yang, 2017, p. 57), so as to increase students’ passing rate.

Therefore, four of the five case institutions surveyed targeted at the requirements of the new teacher qualification exam and changed their curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment. One interviewee teaching pedagogy in a higher vocational institution commented,

Our institution requires us to carefully study the examinations and teach to them, and even requires students to memorize the standard answers. I really can’t accept this. Because there simply is no agreement about different theories in the field of education and there is no standard correct answer to many problems. In the “no rules method” [for example], the teaching process itself requires the teacher to rationally choose the method for instruction that best fits the needs of the learners; how could a paper examination test that? But now we have no choice. It’s like university education is now “teaching to the test,” too.

On the contrary, the elite teachers colleges had few reactions to the teacher qualification exam reform. For example, one representative of the dean’s office in a ministry-governed normal university pointed out:

Our school has national tuition-fee-exempted teacher students; there’s no way the country would have them fail the exam, right? Plus, our school has such a great source of students, and such great teaching staff. We’re not afraid students won’t pass the exam. Of course, a national exam like this makes the teaching-oriented colleges and universities lose their appeal; this is something we are worried about. If you ask me, normal students can take the exam, but non-normal students should also go through the teaching curriculum and practicum. We should integrate the exam with the training.

We can see that reforming the teacher qualification exam system is disuniting teaching from testing and making education exam-oriented, and this creates a huge challenge for the construction of a teacher preparation quality assurance system. When the passing rate on the teacher qualification exam becomes the last straw at which teaching-related colleges and universities can grasp, it changes from a means to a target. It is very likely to dilute the true “professionalism,” oversimplify the teacher training quality accountability, and in a long run even to weaken the quality of teacher preparation.
Path to improving university-based teacher preparation quality assurance systems

Redefining teacher professionalization and restructuring quality assurance for professional preparation

The new emergence of professional education and new prospects for teacher education require to reconsider “Why to specialize in teaching?” and “Why to specialize in teacher education?” if we want to prepare the “professional teachers” for the 21st century. Shulman (1998) believes that being “professional” entails a combination of the following six attributes: (1) sense of duty, even a mission to serve others; (2) scholarly or theoretical understanding; (3) domain of skilled performance or practice; (4) exercising judgment in the face of unavoidable uncertainty; (5) need for learning from experience as theory and practice interact; and (6) a professional community to monitor intrinsic quality and aggregate knowledge (p. 516). These characteristics can shed light on reflecting the standards China currently has been in place for teaching professions and teacher education, not forgetting the clinical nature of the profession and its “combining of theory and practice in local, situated judgments” (Shulman, 1998, p. 525).

Therefore, on the road to professionalization, initial teacher preparation must include more “clinical” components to fill the gap between theory and practice. Many countries including the United Kingdom and the U.S. are now turning to school-based teacher preparation or boarding-style teacher preparation. Although this move is still replete with controversy, there is already consensus on the value of joint teacher education by universities cooperatively with school partners. University-school cooperation has been viewed as one means to bridge theory and practice, as it takes the so-called craft knowledge of school teachers (Cope & Stephen, 2001) and combines it with the research and pedagogical theory of teacher educators in university (Diamond, Parr, & Bulfin, 2017). In the Chinese context, one case college mentioned in our article has already been setting up a cooperative arrangement with schools to bridge the gap between teacher training and practice.

At the same time in China, the majority of teachers being trained at area normal colleges and universities and ordinary universities are servicing the local communities after graduation. In order to prepare them to better serve these local schools, we should campaign for more colleges and universities to implement university-school cooperation centered on the locality as the core in teacher education. From the standpoint of quality accountability, when schools bring up their need for quality initial teacher training, as the employing institutions they should more actively take up the mission of training these teachers.

Considering again the question of what constitutes a profession, most scholars believe that the nature of a profession is a service occupation grounded in knowledge, often having been through a
period of higher education, occupational training, and experience (Evetts, 2013). As Freidson (1994) points out, in a profession a post is held based on institutional practice, and this institutional practice requires certification to prove that enough training has been received to prepare the individual for the job (p. 151). Day (2002) also notes that distinguishing teachers from other occupational groups and viewing them as “professionals” should be linked to the technical culture (knowledge base), service ethics (a promise to clients who need the service), professional commitment (an emphatic recognition of the identities of the individual and the group), and a professional authority (control over classroom practice). Combining these, and excluding qualified admission, the criteria of undergoing long-term professional training, professional ethics, and professional knowledge and skills must all be met in order to constitute a profession. So for a teacher to be a professional, an assurance of training quality must combine certification of qualifications with a learning process. An entire system must be built to ensure that teachers who obtain professional certification do possess professional ethics, knowledge, skills, and autonomy.

Building a policy community for teacher preparation quality assurance system

China has already made great progress in building a teacher preparation quality assurance system. However, due to inconsistent and even internally contradictory policies, implementation has varied and “teaching for the test” exists. Thus, we must consider quality assurance from the standpoint of building a policy community and push for a unified effort between different policies.

The MOE is now advocating for and experimenting in building such a policy community. A typical recent move was the implementation in 2017 of certification for teaching-related programs. When it was defining different grades (see Figure 2) and categories of certification, it linked evaluation results with the teacher accreditation system: (1) Grade 3 teaching-related programs can organize written and oral teaching qualification exams on their own, and those trained in these majors can obtain teacher certification directly as long as they satisfy the curriculum and practicum requirements; (2) Grade 2 teaching-related programs can organize the oral portion of teacher qualification exams on their own; (3) Grade 1 teaching-related programs can participate in teacher qualification exams but the oral and written portions must be the national exam.

Certification in teaching-related programs is featured as “controlling admission to training for teaching majors,” “limiting the overall volume of preparatory institutions for teaching majors that China must maintain,” “improving the training structure for teaching majors, driving transformation and forming a mechanism for promotion” (Zhang, 2017, p. 39).

Such policy community around the teacher preparation quality assurance system must still be improved further, to ensure quality for the entire process from input through procedure to output (see Figure 4). Since the preparation of teachers requires a lengthy period of training, a recent research report by Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2014) points out that the substance and content of
educational training have a large effect on new teachers’ turnover: those who have learned pedagogical methods and been through pedagogical training, especially practical training, class observation, and reflection on self-teaching, have a far smaller chance of leaving teaching after the first year. This viewpoint matches precisely with that expressed in the study by Darling-Hammond (2006), that is, teachers who have not been prepared fully are more likely to quit, which may lead to such grave consequences as a short and unstable supply of teachers (p. 12). Referring to the experience of France, Germany, and the U.S., long-term study of knowledge and skills and a practical curriculum are both essential steps in teacher preparation and are also prerequisites for applying to take the official teacher qualification examination (Song & Zhou, 2016).

However, current certification is limited to the undergraduate level, and there is no certification at the secondary vocational and higher vocational levels where many problems still exist in the training process. Nor are there certification programs at the masters and doctoral teacher preparation levels.

Moreover, the teacher qualification exam, other teacher education standards, and policies are to be more closely aligned. A data system for quality assessment in teacher preparation, including data from the input, process, and output terminals, or on-the-job teacher performance data should be established. For example, the U.S. Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT) can be referred.

**Potential-oriented development in teacher preparation**

With the publication of measures to implement certification for teaching-related majors at ordinary institutions of higher education (provisional version) in 2017, teacher education reform in China
started pushing “a shift from external development to potential-oriented development in building the profession” (MOE, 2017). A shift like this emphasizes the change in teacher preparation from a focus on preservice teacher development of teaching knowledge and skills to that on acknowledging teachers’ professional status and spiritual growth, requiring in teacher education “respecting free will in future teachers’ professional development, an emphasis on self-reflection in lifestyle, encouraging the active use of practice, and developing rational judgment” (Yu, 2018, p. 13; Zhang & Li, 2014). Teachers’ attitudes toward learning and modes of teacher preparation must also be shifted accordingly.

As teacher education reform continues in China and teacher education is professionalized and standardized, the Center for Teacher Education Research at Beijing Normal University where one of the authors of this article is working is exploring “a future-facing teacher preparation program,” building a visionary “FUTURE” framework—“Fairness and justice; Understanding students and caring about their differences; Teaching competence and curriculum leadership; Understanding multiple cultures and adopting a global view; Reflection, research and practical ability; Educational mission and humanistic concern.”

This program begins at student enrollment, requiring students to have an undergraduate degree in a relevant major and a written examination, and adds an oral exam component to systematically evaluate students’ disciplinal knowledge and teaching potential. Reform then starts with curriculum design. On the one hand, creating a “systematized curriculum” while combining “pedagogical principles,” “curriculum and pedagogy,” “psychological development and education,” school administration, and cultural internship in an effort to pull theory and practice closer together. On the other hand, it uses a systematic incremental approach to teaching practice, with six instances of student teaching in the first academic period according to the systematized curriculum, then 16 weeks of practicum twice a week in the second, then 18 weeks of student teaching in the third (including teaching abroad). For the fourth period, a block of education research is arranged to accommodate the student’s graduate thesis research. A cooperative teacher training mechanism between universities, area continuing teacher training institutions and schools has also been established that connects area continuing teacher training institutions with middle schools for cooperative training. Teaching and research staff and outstanding middle school teachers are invited to teach courses in the teacher training curriculum under a triple mentor system, where an academic mentor (university), a discipline mentor (teacher/researcher), and a practice mentor (teacher) guide the student together and use a blend of theory and practice, classroom studies and extracurricular studies, and online and offline teaching.

Along with the curriculum structure is building a full-process teacher preparation data collection system which is meant to facilitate the curriculum process, curriculum resources, and teaching support. Also the system intentionally sets up a subsystem of development record for each student,
including their classroom performance, practice observations, reflection logs, teaching practice, portfolio items, and online discussions. Systematic data collection and analysis are used to support training program improvement.

Furthermore, self-research of teacher educators on their teacher preparation (Lunenberg, Zwart, & Korthagen, 2010) is applied through the process of training. This program already makes use of acknowledging the identity of education students in the field of practice, the pedagogical content knowledge of teacher educators, teacher preparation through university-school cooperation, embodied learning, micro-teaching, and other research and depends on research to improve preparatory programs.

**Conclusions**

In the past 25 years, a system for internal and external quality assurance in China’s university-based teacher preparation has been established. In the process, however, professionalism has wrestled incessantly with market fundamentalism and managerialism. On the one hand, market has created a framework for concepts in the market for teaching labor, with government and primary and secondary schools being the market’s buyers of labor, while new teachers have become the sellers of labor. Through the forces of market competition, the government and primary and secondary schools are choosing the best teachers. On the other hand, managerialism works to simplify management contexts, procedures, and investment and raise its return on investment, and so has taken to more independently supervising the entire input (source of students)—process (of preparation)—output (qualification) chain of teacher education. Managing just the teacher certification endpoint alone would be much simpler, but these two types of reasoning have to a certain extent ignored professionalism and ignored the duration, the procedural nature, and the complexity of training teachers as professionals. In fact, similar phenomena have appeared in the U.S., the United Kingdom, and other countries, which is explained by the competing theories of action about how to bring about program improvement. According to this theory, while policymakers tend to believe external pressures are necessary, most teacher educators trust in the professional and moral commitments of faculty (McDiarmid, 2019). And so, looking at experience so far with China’s quality assurance system for teacher preparation, on the one side, we have to consider the top-down design and construct a complete quality assurance policy community and system database, providing guidance and supervision of colleges and universities and raising their training quality, and more importantly, providing broader data support for raising preparation quality. On the other side, colleges and universities themselves need to follow the path of potential-oriented development, truly recognize that teachers can be professionals, and work on building up partnered cooperation between localities and schools, connect theory with practice, and together train professional, creative teachers.
Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by “How normal students grow up to be good Teachers: A study on the learning process and effectiveness of normal students under the mechanism of U-G-S cooperative teacher education,” the International joint research project of Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University (Project No. ICER201905).

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