

# Sociological Perspective on Developing Undergraduate education—Case of National Standard for Undergraduate Education in China

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**Abstract:** - China issued the first National Standard for Assessing Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Programs Provided by Regular Higher-Education Institutions (the National Standard) in 2018. The Standard, as a significant education policy, matters for China's high education development. The study illustrates the major content of the National Standard and then analyzes the Standard from sociological and cognitive perspective. It is concluded that the National Standard is written based on assumptions of qualities for graduates and on assumptions of qualities believed to be influential in graduates' qualities.

**Keywords:** *National Standard; sociological perspective.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education in China issued the "National Standard" (National Standard for Assessing Quality of Teaching in Undergraduate Programs offered by Chinese High Education Institutions ) on January 2018. The National Standard is the first effort of this kind, aiming at improving the quality of teaching and training in Chinese colleges and universities. Wu Yan, the director of high education department of Chinese ministry of education, claimed that "the standard is a cornerstone for undergraduate program establishment, quality management and development" [1].

Teaching quality standards in other countries often give rather generic descriptions of indicators for majors[2]. Conversely, the Chinese standard delineates standards for each specific major hold by Chinese higher-education institutions. Additionally, the standard for all majors are outlined in a unified structure, that is to say, all majors are assessed against unified indicators while keeping some descriptions specific to each major.

Regarding the significance of the National Standard for China's higher-education, it is quite worth the effort to examine, investigate, analyze the first teaching quality standard for Chinese higher-education institutions.

As for teaching quality, related measurement of teaching quality are underpinned more often with cognitive activation, classroom management and student support deeply rooted in educational psychology[3]. Hargreaves(1998) asserts that conventionally two assumptions underpin the teaching quality conceptualization: one involves student personal qualities related to knowledge, skills and competency; the other one involves qualities of education providers which are believed to be able to result in the expected

qualities from teaching[4]. However, for China's National Standard of Undergraduate Program Teaching Quality, the indicators are not that much psychological. Firstly, the National Standard sets standards not only for student learning outcomes, but also for teaching qualities and management qualities. Secondly, the National Standard sets standard not only for what is going on in class but also out of class such as facilities and management qualities. Thirdly, the National Standard delineates generic educational goals for majors which emphasize much more about social needs rather than personal needs. Those features make the National Standard more sociological than psychological and cognitive as the rationale underpinning the standard is that expected learning outcomes comes from a comprehensive support inside and outside of class, not just limiting to teaching or teaching procedure.

The study examines and analyzes the nature of the National Standard for teaching quality in China in two parts: firstly, major content and specifications are delineated; secondly, review and analysis is conducted subsequently. Finally, a comprehensive discussion about the National Standard is presented.

## II. The National Standard for Assessing Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Programs in China

In this part, the National Standard for assessing undergraduate program teaching quality in China is outlined in nine sections: introduction, coding, goals, specifications, curriculum, teachers, resources such as teaching facilities and conditions, quality assurance management and appendix which illustrates definitions of related terms as shown in figure 1. The national standard delineates specifications for majors. For clear illustration, the national standard content will be displayed by exemplifying the major of modern language and literature[5].

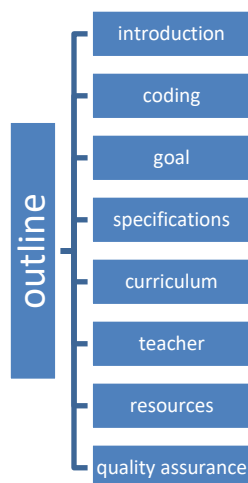


Figure 1: outline of the National Standard

### Introduction of a major

The first section of the standard is a brief introduction about a major. The standard illustrates the qualities of a major, possible programs or interests included in a major and functions of the National Standard for a major.

For example, the standard remarks as for major of modern language and literature:

Modern language and literature, a key part for disciplines of literature and humanities, has possible programs such as foreign languages, foreign literature and regional and country studies. Modern language and literature is cross-disciplinary and might be developed in combination with other majors to form interdisciplinary to better meet social needs.

For this part, the standard explicitly illustrates traits and characteristics of the major and define it as a major being cross-disciplinary and meeting social needs.

### **Coding of a major**

The second of the standard codes a major with a specific number.

For example, the major of modern language and literature is coded with 0502. Existing and available programs of the major are labelled by adding a number to the major code. For example, programs of modern language and literature major are labelled with codes ranging from 050201 to 050268T. 050201 represents English program of modern language and literature major as the most-widely-opened program while 050268T represents Yoruba as the least-held program. Generally, different codes align with a foreign language with only two exceptions 050261 and 050262. 050261 represents translation and 050262 represents business English program.

For this part, the standard explicitly mandates coding number for programs possibly held by foreign languages and literature major. The coding matters in the sense that coding for majors and programs are identical for high-education institutions across China. The coding is made for the convenience of governance and management from government authorities. Coding here is a unified standard for majors and programs across China.

Moreover, the standard mandates here specifically the function of the standard as “foundation to build, develop and assess the major” and “major of modern language and literature of institutions should make training program policies to meet social development needs in accordance with institution’s status in the high-education system and features”.

For this remark, the standard explicitly mandates the function of the standard as the most fundamental policy for program building and development. The standard leaves room for adjustment according to specific institution’s conditions.

### **Goals of a major**

The national standard defines general educational goals for a major.

For example, the standard remarks: “the major of modern language literature aims to develop students’ comprehensive competency, foreign language proficiency, language knowledge to help learners to adapt to the needs arising from interaction with other regions and countries. Students will work in all walks of life especially in foreign language education, academic research”.

In addition, the standard emphasizes the point that the educational goals for institutions are to meet demands for social and economic needs. The standard meanwhile stresses it that institutions of levels should set up educational goals suitable for their conditions, that educational goals should be kept stable with minor

changes to suit the social, economic and cultural development needs. The statement here foregrounds the importance of program should be continuously upgraded and improved.

#### 1. specifications of a major

The national standard mandates in the following aspects: duration, degree, disposition, knowledge and competency.

#### 2. duration and degree for a major

For duration and degree, the standard requires that all modern languages and literature programs should provide as long as 4 years of education, adjustable from 3 to 6 years if necessary. Students who have gained required credits and meet qualification requirements will be granted degree of bachelor of arts.

According to the standard, a student could no longer gain degree if the program exceeds 6 years or shortens to less than 3 years. The degree could only be granted on the condition that a student has gained required credits according to the written training program policy.

#### 3. disposition

For disposition, the standard mandates that students of modern language and literature major should have a positive outlook on life and values, moral excellence, Chinese Spirit and international horizon, social responsibility, arts and science thinking, spirit of cooperation, creative personality and core discipline competencies.

#### 4. knowledge

For knowledge, the national standard mandates that students of modern language and literature major should have a command of foreign language knowledge, literature knowledge, regional and national knowledge and Chinese culture knowledge, core knowledge of related discipline or related art and science disciplines to develop cross disciplinary knowledge structure.

#### 5. competency

For competency, the national standard mandates that students of modern language and literature major should be able to use language for communication, to appreciate literature work, cross-culture communication and critical thinking, to research, to apply information technology knowledge, to learn autonomously and to implement practice.

To sum up, this section is the most closely related to personal qualities expected to be developed from receiving education. This part is quite cognitive, filled with words knowledge, skill and competency. The expected competencies and knowledge are outcomes of education research findings. For instance, on top of discipline-related knowledge and competency, critical thinking competency development is emphasized especially here in the article. Moreover, this part is very socially oriented in the way that less discipline-related knowledge and competency are also emphasized such as Chinese Spirit, positive outlook on life and values, moral excellence, social responsibility. This part responds with the trend in Chinese high-education reform implemented recently that the foundation of talent cultivation is moral education(Li De Shu Ren), which makes the standard less cognitive and more socially-responded.

## **Curriculum**

For curriculum section, the standard writes in two sections: framework and curriculum structure. The framework part explicitly mandates

### 1. framework

The standard firstly illustrates that majors should design training programs according to goals and specifications. Then the standard illustrates that curriculum framework fabricates on five categories: liberal education courses, discipline-related core courses, program-specific courses, practicum and thesis writing.

Then the standard requires that curriculum design should weigh balance between different types of courses: liberal education courses and discipline-related core course, skill training and discipline knowledge teaching, compulsory courses and optional course, discipline-related core courses and discipline-related course, class teaching and practicum. The standard emphasizes that competency development and discipline knowledge should be the focus of curriculum design with focus on cross-cultural communication competency, critical thinking ability and creative ability development.

At last, the standard mandates that programs of modern language and literature major should provide curriculum with gross credits of 150 at least and 180 at most and 2400 to 2900 hours of course hour. The standard also remarks that modern language and literature majors of institutions in China could design ratio between different types of course justified on the institution's particular conditions and educational goals.

### 2. curriculum structure

The standard mandates curriculum required courses for a major in different categories: liberal education course, discipline-related core course, program-specific course, practicum and thesis writing. Courses are listed for different programs in a major. Courses of different categories in major of modern language literature will be listed as example.

#### 1) Liberal education courses

Liberal education courses divides in two streams: common liberation education courses and institution-provided courses in liberal education.

For modern language and literature major, the standard lists courses that might be provided such as political and ideology course, information technology, physical education, military theory and training, innovation and business-starting education, second language education.

For modern language and literature major, the standard then lists courses that might be provided by the institution in liberal education field. Those courses are considered to be related to broaden students' horizon, enhance students' morality level and personality.

In the end, the standard illustrates that institutions should use feasible curriculum resources opened by in-position teachers to help students develop knowledge structure in accordance to specifications requirement.

#### 2) Discipline-related core courses

Discipline-related core course category is made up of courses teaching foreign language skill and discipline knowledge. The standard requires that discipline-related core course hours should take account of 50% to 80% of total course hours. Foreign language skill courses are courses developing students' foreign language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. discipline knowledge courses are teaching linguistics, translation, foreign literature, regional and country studies, cross-culture study, and comparative literature, academic writing and research methodology. The standard lists courses considered most related to the program like English, translation, business English, Russian, French, Japanese, Germany, Spanish, Arabic and other less-spoken languages respectively. The standard however mandates that translation and business English programs could open courses more related to their interest beyond the limit of core courses listed in the standard.

For English program, the standard lists courses considered most related to the program interest: comprehensive English reading, English listening and speaking, English speaking, introductory course to linguistics, introductory course to English literature, English speech, English grammar, English reading, English writing, English debate, English-Chinese translation, English-Chinese interpreting, cross-culture communication, western culture history, thesis writing, research methodology.

### 3) Program-specific courses

Program-specific courses might be both compulsory and optional across programs such as foreign literature, foreign language linguistics, translation, foreign language education, regional and country studies, comparative literature and cross-culture studies, foreign language for special purpose and so on. The standard remarks that modern language and literature majors across Chinese institutions could open program-specific courses according to their goals and specifications set in training program policies.

It needs to be noted that there are no listed courses in the standard as the discipline-related core course.

### 4) Practicum

The standard remarks that practicum intends to promote all-round development of students and might be implemented through activities such as professional internship programs, innovation and entrepreneurship practice, social practice and international communication programs.

The standard defines that professional internship aims to enhance students' capabilities of solving problems in real life with professional knowledge. The standard also mandates that programs should make internship plan to explicitly define the goals, requirements, content and steps to take and professional guidance and assessment.

The standard defines the innovation and entrepreneurship practice aims to enhance students' innovation and enterprise competencies. The standard also mandates that programs should make feasible plans to organize competition activities, community-learning activities, academic groups and enterprise innovative activities.

The standard defines the social practice aims to help students gain better and more insightful understanding of Chinese society and conditions to strengthen students' social responsibility. The standard also mandates that programs should make social practice plans according to educational goals and social

needs by organizing social survey activities, volunteer activities, public service activities, spare-time jobs and aid education activities.

The standard defines international communication programs aim to broaden students' international horizon and enhance cross-culture communication capabilities. The standard also mandates that programs should make plans to organize international camping, short-term study abroad program, home-broad combined training programs.

#### 5) Thesis-writing

The standard defines that thesis writing aims to develop students' abilities and assess if students are capable of solving problems with discipline theories. The standard mandates that thesis topics should align with educational goals and qualification requirements, writing should be in recognized academic style in formats such as academic article, translation, survey report, practice report and case study report. The standard also mandates that thesis should be written in the language the major requires except thesis in translation. The standard mandates that institutions should set up guidelines for topics, proposal writing, thesis writing, thesis defense and identify responsibilities mentors have. According to the standard, process of thesis writing should be recorded in a form.

### **Teacher**

The standard teachers for a major should meet several qualifications in the following aspects: teacher structure, teacher qualifications and teacher development.

#### 1. Teacher structure

The standard lists requirements for a major's teaching resource in terms of age, degrees and professional titles. For modern language and literature major, the standard mandates that institutions should hire foreign language teachers if condition permits. The standard mandates institutions of applied professional disciplines should hire professional experts as mentors. According to the standard, at least 6 full-time teachers with doctor degrees are required, at least 3 full-time teachers for majors of less-spoken languages, more than 30% of faculties should have master or doctor degrees, teacher-student ratio should be lower than 18:1 which means every 18 student should have one full-time teacher in service.

#### 2. Teacher qualifications

The standard makes the following requirements for teacher qualifications of modern language and literature major:

- 1) Full-time teachers should have teacher qualification certificate according to "Teacher's Law of People's Republic of China" and "Higher Education Law of People's Republic of China".
- 2) Teachers should have graduate degrees related to foreign languages disciplines.
- 3) Teachers should acquire professional knowledge, be familiar with foreign language teaching theories and methodologies, should have some knowledge of education and psychology.
- 4) Teachers should have a good command of target language.
- 5) Teachers should be capable of implementing research in a identified research field or domain.

Additionally, the standard also mandates that foreign language teachers should possess mentioned qualifications.

### 3. Teacher development

Moreover, the standard mandates institutions should provide conditions for teachers' in-career development. According to the standard, institutions should set up plans, rules, regularities to help teacher to develop professionally by encouraging teacher to pursue degree education, receive in-service training, sabbatical leave, and participate industry practice to help teachers to renew educational concept understandings and principle theories, to enhance professional capabilities and research capabilities. The standard also remarks that teachers should hold views of life-long development and making feasible development plans to improve teaching and research levels.

To sum up, the standard in this section specifically mandates specifications for teachers' qualifications. Requirements for teachers present the underpinning rationale that teachers with certain qualities could result in qualities from students. The assumption is rather cognitive and research-based. Still, mandates and requirements in this part are also social in the sense that the specifications actually set standards for future program assessment.

## Resources

The standard lists requirements for qualified intuitions for a major building and development in aspects regarding teaching resources: teaching facilities, information resources, teaching practice and teaching funding. Requirements are different with majors. Requirements of resources for major of modern language and literature will be illustrated.

### 1. Teaching facilities

For teaching facilities of modern language and literature major, the standard mandates that special-allocated teaching classrooms and buildings should at least meet teaching needs both in number and in function. Professionals for teaching facility maintenance should be allocated. According to education ministry requirement for undergraduate programs, every student should possess teaching and administrative space no less than 9 square meters; every student should be equipped with teaching instrument and equipment worth of no less than 3000 RMB; every 100 students should be equipped with at least 10 computers and every 100 students should be equipped with at least 7 seats in multi-media rooms and language labs.

### 2. Information resources

For teaching facilities of modern language and literature major, the standard mandates that institutions should provide sufficient books and resources to meet learning, teaching and research needs for both students and teachers. Information resources should be administered in a formal way and all information resources should be accessed by both students and teachers. Generally, every student should be provided at least 100 books and certain percentage of foreign language books, magazines and newspapers; every student should be provided at least 4 books annually; digital resources should be provided; internet access should be available to meet learning and living needs; institutions should have foundations for developing and implementing coursewares.



### 3. Teaching practice

For teaching facilities of modern language and literature major, the standard mandates that institutions should meet generally stable conditions for implementing teaching activities; institutions should build language labs to meet program needs and professional development such as language labs, facilities for simultaneous interpretation, training centers, chartered teaching practice base; institutions should make use of all possible resources to build innovation and entrepreneurship platforms.

### 4. Teaching funding

For teaching facilities of modern language and literature major, the standard mandates that institutions should guarantee teaching and research funding for the program. According to educational ministry regulations, daily running cost for teaching should be more than 1000 RUMB and the budget should be raised for different institutions in different economically-developed areas.

## **Quality assurance**

The standard mandates requirements for institutions to make policies to ensure teaching quality. In this section, the standard make mandates in two aspects: teaching and assessment, quality assurance system.

### 1. Teaching and assessment

#### 1) Teaching

For major of modern language literature, the standard makes the following mandates: teaching should be implemented in accordance with teaching syllabus for the major; language knowledge, language proficiency and other capabilities such as critical thinking, cross-culture communication and autonomous learning are also emphasized; teaching should be implemented in an enlightening way; discussion and participation are encouraged; student-center is the focus; information technology is encouraged to be integrated into subject teaching.

#### 2) Assessment

The standard asserts that assessment should be implemented to promote learning. According to the standard, what to assess and how to assess should be comply with syllabus; how to assess and how to use assessment outcomes should be implemented based on research; feedback should be provided to adjust and improve teaching; assessment of both product-orientation and process-orientation should be integrated

### 2. Quality assurance system

As for teaching quality assurance, the standard requires in the following aspects: mechanisms of teaching-procedure supervision, tracking records of graduates feedback, continuous improvement should be established to evaluate if plan has achieved its expected educational goals.

1) Mechanisms of teaching procedure supervision

The standard mandates that institutions should establish a teaching procedure supervision system which identifies explicit requirement through teaching process and assesses curriculum design and teaching quality on a regular basis.

2) Tracking records of graduate feedback

The standard mandates that institutions should establish tracking records of graduate feedback and employer feedback to conclude if training program has effectively achieved its proposed educational goals on a regular basis.

3) Continuous improvement

The standard mandates that institutions should establish a continuous improvement system to ensure teaching quality through program, graduate feedback and employer feedback could be used for continuous improvement.

### **III. REVIEW OF THE STANDARD**

After exemplifying the standard in reference to the major of modern language and literature, we find that generally criteria for all majors in the standard are fabricated in eight sections. The first section is general introduction of the major which delineates essential attributes of a major in terms of its discipline, knowledge and possible service target. The second section is coding of a major. In this section, every major is labelled with a specific code designated by the ministry of education and list existing available programs held by the major. Codes for those programs are numbered under the major code. For instance, the major of modern language and literature is 0502, then English program of the major is numbered with adding a number 01 to the major code 0502, thus becoming 050201. Every major and every program subordinate to the major are labelled in this way. The third section delineates educational goals for a major. The goals are descriptions of expected qualities of graduates in terms of knowledge, competency and skills. The fourth section delineates specifications of a major in terms of duration, degree, qualifications in aspects of disposition, knowledge, skill and competency. The fifth section is curriculum which delineates general guidelines and specifications of curriculum framework of a major and structures courses into different categories of liberal education course, discipline-related core courses, program-specific courses, practicum courses and thesis writing. The sixth section is mandates for teachers in terms of teacher qualifications and mandates for institutions in terms of faculty and teacher development. The seventh section delineates environment in terms of teaching facilities, information resources, teaching practice resources and teaching funding. The eighth section delineates management of quality assurance in terms of teaching quality and quality assurance system. The ninth section is glossary in which involved terms are listed and defined.

The standard delineates requirements and attributes for teaching quality assessment. Reading through the standard, three points are stressed as Depart Chief of Chinese Higher Education Ministry Wu Yan (2018) put it in the news conference of issuing the standard. Firstly, the standard makes requirements on a threshold level. It means criteria listed in the standard are considered to be minimal conditions for running undergraduate programs for a major in China. In a word, the standard is elementary criteria for an undergraduate program rather than criteria for teaching excellence. This explains why standard for every

major remarks that “institutions should make program training plans according to their own conditions and educational goals”. The standard is used as criteria to assess qualifications of an undergraduate program and to evaluate the program quality and development. Secondly, the standard is both qualitative and quantitative. It is qualitative for it delineates requirements for possible directions for program establishment, development and improvement. It is quantitative for it makes requirements in specific numbers and figures. Those figures and numbers are referring to resources that could be counted such as the ratio of teacher and student, teaching facilities and funding. Thirdly, though teaching quality has been quite cognitive in the way that cognitive qualities are very much stressed in terms of knowledge, skill and competency. For this standard, disposition in terms of moral and ideological education are equally emphasized as educational goals.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

As the first national standard for assessing undergraduate programs, the standard is both cognitive and sociological, both result-oriented and process-oriented.

As an educational policy, the standard is cognitive. Requirements and descriptions of the policy are deeply based on findings and understandings of what is learning and what is teaching. Generally, the standard descriptions demonstrate qualities we consider qualified graduates should possess and qualities we consider helpful to bring in that outcome. For instance, the standard delineates what qualified graduates should be like in terms of knowledge, skill and competency. Critical thinking and creativity should be developed and cultivated as possible outcome of education also presents our ungraded understanding of educational goals. The description of educational goals for a major is heavily influenced by Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives. The description of curriculum framework is based on findings of discipline-related pedagogy research and disciplinary research conclusions.

The standard delineates not only what considers important for qualified graduates but also what considers important for resulting in that qualified graduates. The understanding of what might result in qualified graduates is underpinned by research findings. For instance, teachers play a vital role in student performance. This explains why the standard delineates requirements for teachers’ certifications and qualifications. In the standard, teachers are recognized as professionals in the light of discipline-related knowledge and knowledge in pedagogy and doing research. Research competency is very much emphasized as an separated requirement from other qualities. But the standard is also sociological in acknowledging that teachers need institutional support for in-service training and degree-pursuit support. Additionally, the standard is sociological in the sense that it delineates minimal requirements for qualified undergraduate programs with support in terms of management and other not so cognitive resources such as funding and facilities.

The standard is both result-oriented and process-oriented. It is result-oriented in the sense that the educational goals highlights the results of education in terms of knowledge, skill and competency. Assessment of the results could be displayed by students’ examination assessment scores, discipline-related certifications and other performance records. Though results are what assessment strives for, the standard also emphasizes the importance of process of education by delineating requirements in quality assurance. The standard in the eighth section highlights the significance of quality assurance management systems. The standard remarks that in-process teaching quality assessment should be implemented to provide feedbacks from students. Not only teaching quality assessment should be implemented, feedback from graduates and

employers should also be implemented so that teaching could be continuously adapted to better suit personal and social needs.

Finally, the standard matters as the first policy for assessing teaching quality of undergraduate programs in a way that it is and it will be for educational governance work since then.

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