# Assessing Student Engagement in China: Responding to Local and Global Discourse on Raising Educational Quality

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*China's heated education policy climate in 2010 indicated an increasing national concern for improving educational quality and educational quality assessment. Despite glowing portraits of Chinese education painted by international observers, the Chinese public has expressed consistent dissatisfaction with educational quality. The inter-related research projects described in this article were launched with a desire to deepen comparative discussion of educational quality and to respond to China's drive to improve and assess educational quality across all levels of schooling. This paper will introduce how educational quality is framed in key policy reform documents shaping Chinese education over the next decade. This will provide the backdrop for findings from two research projects that represent an effort to re-focus quality and quality assessment debates on high school and college students and their educational experiences. Derived and adapted from over a decade of robust research on student engagement in the U.S., the research projects include surveys on student engagement, a key factor in effective educational practice largely missing from Chinese quality assessment frameworks and toolkits.*

Not long before Shanghai's PISA results caught the world's attention in 2010, Chinese educational authorities launched plans to support the country's goal to "build a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2020" 1 (Hu, 2007). Shortly after, China experienced a year of educational media attention and policy-making frenzy. A key document, titled Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 (hereafter the Blueprint) debuted in July 2010 after three years of planning, multiple revisions, expert and public involvement. The Blueprint outlines goals for all stages and aspects of education over the next decade. In January 2011, the State Council, the "cabinet" of the central government of the People's Republic of China, issued a follow-up action plan for the Blueprint (hereafter the Action Plan) detailing key implementation projects.2

These two documents have received unprecedented public scrutiny and provide the context for our examination of how Chinese policy makers and educators are re-conceptualizing educational quality. Serious public concern for quality assessment features prominently in new policies in response to a suffocating environment of test score-equivalent-quality and outcome-

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centered assessments. As a result of reforms characterized by rapid educational expansion, devolution of funding, diversification of institutional missions, and the quest for world class schools, a nationwide debate has centered on how to define, measure, and achieve educational effectiveness and innovation. Despite glowing portraits of Chinese education painted by international observers, Ministry of Education (MOE) officers, school administrators, and researchers have expressed consistent dissatisfaction with existing mechanisms. These are primarily standardized tests, research activity, and infrastructure measures for assessing the quality of student, faculty, and institutional outcomes. The inter-related research projects described in this article were launched with a desire to deepen comparative discussion of educational quality and to respond to China's drive to improve and assess educational quality across all levels of schooling.

The research projects' use of student engagement surveys represents an effort to re-focus on the educational experiences of students in relation to education quality and new quality assessments. The phrase "student engagement" denotes the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educational activities in high school and college, and what they think of these experiences (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kuh, 2003). Derived and adapted from robust research on student engagement at Indiana University, the National Survey of Student Engagement-China (NSSE-C) and the High School Survey of Student Engagement-China (HSSSE-C) were designed to measure student engagement at undergraduate and high school levels respectively, a key factor in effective educational practice largely missing from Chinese quality assessment frameworks. The two are distinct in their emphasis and methodology, but together provide insight on how debates about quality are largely consistent across secondary and post-secondary schooling. The surveys represent the first evaluation instruments to be used in China that focus on the concept of student engagement. A key feature of this project is the simultaneous development of surveys for both high school and college students. Tracking the development of student engagement across the secondary and post-secondary years is crucial to understanding educational quality in the Chinese context. High-stakes tests (and students' ability to pay) determine college matriculation and also shape college experiences. A focus on student engagement allows researchers to explore factors that have impact on college access and success. It also allows policy makers and practitioners to address and act upon these factors. HSSSE-C data allow us to probe whether students' activities in high schools are consistent with the normative performance demands reported by college students in NSSE-C. Complementing the high-stakes performance tests that characterize the Chinese secondary school experience, HSSSE-C also allows us to begin to identify specific educational processes that are linked to outcomes that Chinese standardized and entrance examination tests measure.

In this article, we first analyze education quality improvement and quality assessment discourse in the new policies and their mandates for Chinese high schools and colleges. We then trace the trajectories of the NSSC-C and HSSSE-C projects and research findings in relation to quality improvement and assessment. Our discussion of the NSSE-C data draws on research already published in China, while our analysis of HSSSE-C data draws on its first 2007 pilot study in

Shanghai. We conclude by summarizing the significance of our student-centered approach, survey instruments, and specific conclusions for China's new reform era.

**An Analysis of Chinese National Policy on *Zhiliang* Assessment and Evaluation for High Schools & Higher Education**

Akin to their counterparts in the U.S. and worldwide, Chinese policy documents are frequently scrutinized to evaluate changing policy climates. Examination of *tifa*, the Chinese expression for "how policies are framed and formulated," provides a useful starting point for comprehending what education policies intend and how their implementation is envisioned. Our brief examination of the *Blueprint* and corresponding *Action Plan* highlights two salient themes: systematic improvement of educational quality and innovation in education quality assessment/evaluation. This analysis serves as a backdrop for our introduction of the two student engagement projects, the HSSSE-C at the high school level and the NSSE-C at the undergraduate level.

The *Blueprint*'s preamble summarizes China's major educational challenges, namely that, "teaching contents and methods are relatively outdated, schoolwork burdens on primary and middle school students are too heavy, the promotion of quality education is arrested, our students are weak in their adaptability to society, and innovative, practical and versatile professionals are in acute shortage" (Blueprint, 2010). Quality improvement emerges as a catchphrase for resolving these perceived weaknesses,[3] as evidenced by two of the *Blueprint*'s five guiding principles, "reform and innovation" and "improving quality of education" (Blueprint, 2010). One crucial innovation in the principle of "reform and innovation" is education quality assessment/evaluation reform. The proposed reform mandates for high schools that "a scientific teaching quality evaluation system shall be in place, and academic proficiency tests and comprehensive evaluation of student quality should be instituted throughout senior middle school education" (Blueprint, 2010). For higher education, the *Blueprint* advocates "a project to ensure undergraduate teaching quality and to transform college education shall be undertaken comprehensively. Supervision over teaching shall be tightened up, and teaching quality guaranteed institutionally. College teaching evaluation shall be improved" (Blueprint, 2010). Of particular relevance to student-focused institutional reforms, the *Blueprint* reiterates the significance of quality assessment/evaluation as a complex process demanding diverse assessment approaches that involve multiple stake holders:

> We will improve the evaluation of teaching. We will set up scientific and diverse benchmarks for such evaluation, according to teaching goals and concepts on talents or professionals. *Teaching quality shall be evaluated with the participation of government, schools, parents and communities.* We will keep records of students and improve the assessment of comprehensive quality. *Diverse evaluation approaches that help promote student development shall be explored to encourage students to be optimistic and independent and become useful persons* [emphasis added by authors] (Blueprint, 2010).

In addition, the *Blueprint* highlights quality assessment/evaluation of education processes in key reform experiments. For higher education this involves improving undergraduate education quality and teaching quality; for high schools "an educational quality monitoring and evaluating system shall be perfected and the findings of the evaluation should be publicized at regular intervals" (Blueprint, 2010). The *Action Plan* adopts similar priorities. One of its ten special reform experiments is establishing an education quality monitoring and assessment mechanism for elementary, middle and high schools. As for higher education, the *Action Plan* aims to improve quality and implement an innovation-oriented academic evaluation system. Despite the fact that the *Blueprint* and *Action Plan* aim to diversify assessments and broaden participation, student voice and experience are largely missing and educational outcomes are prioritized over processes. As noted in the extended quotation above, students are mentioned merely in passing and only with regard to increasing participation in assessment/evaluation.

**The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE-China): Focusing Reform on Improving Undergraduate Learning**

At the postsecondary level, quality improvement in 'talent training' (*rencai peiyang*), or teaching and learning, stands out in the *Blueprint*:

> Establish the central status of talent training in higher educational institutions. Cultivate specialized talents and innovative talents that are persistent, ethical, knowledgeable and competent. Increase input in teaching and learning. Prioritize teaching in faculty evaluation…Enhance the quality assurance system in teaching and learning. Improve assessment of teaching and learning in higher education. (Blueprint, 2010)

Here, assessment of teaching and learning in higher education primarily refers to the 2002-2008 National Undergraduate Teaching and Learning Evaluation (*Quanguo benke jiaoxue gongzuo shuiping pinggu, abbr. Pinggu*), a state-initiated and sponsored evaluation program. In addition to government effort in assessing quality, a number of centers and institutes publish annual university ranking reports. These rankings, regarded as assessments of institutional quality, have drawn enormous attention from the public as well as scholars and policy makers.

Distinct from these efforts of quality assessment, the NSSE-C student engagement survey provides an alternative approach to addressing and assessing quality in higher education by adopting a student-centered perspective. It was modeled after the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which obtains information on an annual basis from North American four-year colleges and universities about student participation in programs that are provided for their learning and personal development or engagement. Administered by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University since 2000, NSSE has attracted more than 1,400 four-year institutions in the United States and in Canada to participate in the annual survey (NSSE, 2010). The NSSE instrument offers item-level data and summary institutional performance scores based on five benchmarks of student engagement (NSSE, 2000) compared with peer institutions. These benchmarks include the level of academic challenge, active and

collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. As institutions are using NSSE as an assessment tool, they also seek to convert results from the engagement surveys into actions that improve student experiences and educational effectiveness. Each benchmark represents a domain area that is conveyable and actionable on campuses.

Chinese policy makers and educational researchers explicitly sought international models of higher education as they debated the structures and processes that lead to world class educational quality. Heidi Ross wondered whether an appropriately contextualized survey such as the NSSE might provide a useful springboard for promoting cross-national dialogue on educational quality for three key reasons. First, student engagement surveys gather student responses about their college experiences and data about educational *processes* instead of *inputs* for teaching and learning. These inputs include infrastructure, expenditures on undergraduate education, teaching materials, and faculty numbers holding advanced degrees, which are prioritized in existing assessment systems. Second, the student engagement survey elicits student voices by inviting students to share, deliberate on and learn from their perspectives on the quality of education received in colleges and universities. In contrast, existing assessment systems of national evaluations or rankings entail minimum participation of college students, the very participants who are described as the center of higher education. Last but not least, results from the student engagement survey identify practices in higher education that are actionable for institutional diagnosis and improvement. The student engagement survey not only serves as an assessment tool for accreditation and accountability, but also provides institutions with information they can use to enhance educational quality.

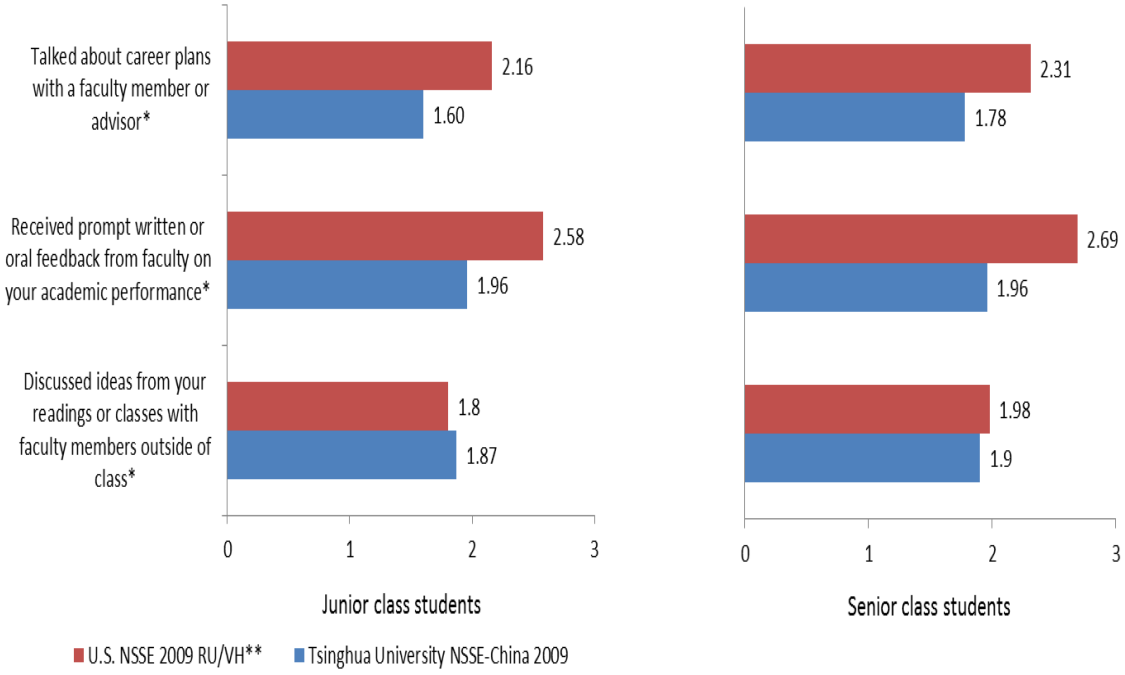
Initiated by Ross in collaboration with Tsinghua University in China, NSSE-C has developed into an influential project in China. Based on NSSE, the NSSE-C instrument was translated into the Chinese language and adapted to the Chinese context[4] by a team of doctoral students and a visiting professor from Tsinghua University in the fall of 2007. The instrument was pre-tested in China with pilot surveys in six institutions in Beijing in the winter of 2007, and further tested with cognitive interviews in five institutions of various types and in different regions in China, during the summer of 2008.

The first full survey administration in 2009 was joined by 27 voluntarily participating institutions throughout China. In April 2009, the NSSE-C research team held a national workshop at Tsinghua University on project goals and survey administration. Participating institutional researchers gathered at Tsinghua University again in December 2009 to discuss experiences in analyzing, reporting and utilizing the survey data. Two key questions structured discussions: (1) Was the goal of assessment *for improvement* being adequately addressed by participating institutions? And (2) Were the survey data merely an addition to respective institutional data banks, or utilized by institutional researchers to inform policies and practices? One institutional case we introduce here suggests that the NSSE-C project has begun to enrich teaching and learning quality assessment discussions and practices.

Based on the NSSE-C 2009 data collected from undergraduate students at Tsinghua University, Dr. Yan Luo and her colleagues published a report on undergraduate education quality. The report triggered a series of initiatives. Three examples of such activities were university-wide discussion and policy drafting in student-faculty interaction, professional development for undergraduate teachers, and directed attention to student learning as an alternative view of quality education. Institutional pressures to assess and improve undergraduate education quality came from both global competition for talent and domestic demand for accountability. In the past few years, overseas universities and especially those in Hong Kong have begun to lure high school graduates away from the best universities in mainland China with either fellowship provision or reputation in quality teacher and learning. As an elite member of China's *Project 985* [5] – comprised of institutions that aim to become world-class universities – Tsinghua University secured a fiscal allocation of 1.8 billion RMB *yuan* for this project alone. Evidence for quality undergraduate teaching and learning is seen as crucial to demonstrating accountability. By comparing itself with high ranking institutions in the United States on the measures of undergraduate college experiences and effective educational practices, Tsinghua was responding to external and internal pressures for quality assessment. In this context, NSSE-C was perceived as an appropriate and timely cross-cultural assessment tool that took undergraduate education seriously. Beyond quality assessment, NSSE-C data also provided direct evidence to support policy and practice reforms at Tsinghua, leading to quality improvement in undergraduate teaching and learning.

Data and policy recommendations shared here include the benchmark of student-faculty interaction. Researchers found that Tsinghua undergraduates reported much less student-faculty interaction compared with their peers in the United States. Item by item comparison (Figure 1) was used to demonstrate that Tsinghua undergraduates scored significantly lower than their U.S. peers in talking with faculty about career plans and in receiving faculty feedback on academic performance. Of the survey respondents, 27.1 percent reported that they had *never* received prompt feedback from faculty on their academic performance, and 44.3 percent *never* had a discussion regarding career plans with any faculty member or advisor. Comparative figures from the U.S. NSSE 2009 survey were about 7 percent and 20 percent respectively.

**Figure 1 Comparing Tsinghua Undergraduate and U.S. Peer Student-faculty Interaction Data source: Tsinghua data from Luo et al. (2010); U.S. data from NSSE (2009a, 2009b)**




*Grand mean of the item scale: 4="Very often", 3="Often", 2="Sometimes", 1="Never".
**Carnegie classification: Research universities with very high research activities

These findings provided a solid foundation for policy recommendation on improving the student-faculty relationship at Tsinghua University through promoting undergraduate research with faculty and changing faculty office hour policies. Beyond spurring reform at the institutional level, Tsinghua's published results have also been widely read and commented upon by academic and non-academic readers, and have subsequently influenced how universities and the wider public might come to perceive the quality of higher education as student-centered and student-valued.

Like Tsinghua University, other institutions that participated in NSSE-C are faced with fierce competition for students and strong pressure for accountability. China's transition from elite to mass higher education in the last decade has transformed the college landscape. It is now characterized by a more diverse student population, an increasingly explicit stratified hierarchy of higher education institutions, and a common perception that education is a private investment rather than a public good. The number of students studying in China's tertiary sector today is greater than that of the U.S., as nearly 25 percent of the age cohort is paying its way through an increasingly expensive system of public, private, and hybrid institutions in

order to compete in the labor force. This generation of students and their parents experience more choices and more risks. They are asking tough questions of college administrators and teachers, demanding affordable and marketable education that is both relevant and individually-tailored. Competing for students, faculty, funding, and prestige, college administrators seek alternative measures to assess whether their programs address the needs and desires of their clients. NSSE-C provided such a measure.

Looking back, NSSE-C and related institutional actions prefigured the *Blueprint's* call to "enhance the quality assurance system in teaching and learning and improve assessment of teaching and learning in higher education" (Blueprint, 2010). This call is not new rhetoric being imposed from the top echelons. Universities craving educationally sound methods to stay competitive as Chinese higher education has become increasingly entangled in the dense web of global higher education have been motivated to effectively assess and improve undergraduate education with a student-centered approach, or "the central status of talent training" (Blueprint, 2010).

**The High School Survey of Student Engagement China (HSSSE-China): Refocusing Reform on Student Voice in Educational Experience**

Chinese high schools are keenly aware of how they are inextricably linked to yet distinct from colleges, and this dual focus is captured in our conclusions regarding the findings of the HSSSE-C. Shanghai students' performance on PISA 2009 took the world by surprise, although it should not have (OECD, 2010). Individuals such as Robert Compton and President Obama called it "our generation's Sputnik moment" (Dillon, 2010). Sensational news headlines affirmed China's image as an educational superpower that educated students through a carefully articulated curriculum with high expectations and high incentives for success.

Student experiences and educational processes need to be assessed to interpret Shanghai's "stunning" scores and the significance they hold in relation to students. Yet, as noted above, assessing educational quality as defined by the *Blueprint* and the *Action Plan* generally leaves out student experiences; students are arguably considered objects of education reform rather than masters of their own education. How education and learning is perceived by students themselves (not to mention their teachers) remains largely unknown and empirically under-examined, and studies of student engagement can begin to fill in some of the missing pieces.

Debuted in 2004, the U.S.-based High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) administered by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) at Indiana University is the largest of its kind in the United States. Since 2006, more than 350,000 students in over 40 states have taken the survey (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). HSSSE investigates the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of students about their work, their school learning environment, and their interaction with the school community. The survey is structured in three dimensions (compared with NSSE's five benchmarks), including engagement of the mind, the heart, and engagement in the life of the school.[6] The survey examines a set of relations that shape student experience in high schools, namely, relations "between the student and school community, the student and

school adults, the student and peers, the student and instruction, and the student and curriculum." Distinctive in its student-centered and process-focused approach, HSSSE, like NSSE, was created to complement if not counter student achievement outcomes assessed through test scores, graduation rates, and adequate yearly progress.

Since September 2007, HSSSE researchers have collaborated with their Chinese counterparts to create HSSSE-C, addressing quality assessment concerns of Chinese high schools that are similar to those outlined by their U.S. counterparts. The HSSSE-C project involves a collaboration of researchers and graduate research assistants at CEEP and East China Normal University. In 2007 the translation and cultural adaption of the survey was completed, and the first pilot study was conducted in a Shanghai high school with 119 participants. In 2008 the survey was revised by both parties and a second pilot study was completed in 16 high schools, located in 15 provinces and municipalities across China, involving approximately 8,000 participants.

Like NSSE-C, HSSSE-C has been adapted to retain a reliable student engagement-focused core while being culturally sensitive to the Chinese context. The first pilot indicated that most Chinese high school students understood the instrument well and accurately responded to questions. We have also found potential ambiguities and inapplicable items. The revision pertains to twenty-seven changes designed to allow for a more precise and relevant report of student lives.[7] HSSSE-C's validity is manifested by the fact that its findings highly resonate with the existing literature on Chinese high school student life.

**Quality Education Initiatives/Failures in Chinese High Schools and HSSSE's Potential**

Literature on Chinese high school education abounds, but lacks depth and nuance. With some astute exceptions (OECD, 2010) most of it critically examines high stakes testing, namely the National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE), and its ensuing consequences for student learning. The culture of high school is portrayed in most accounts as conscribed by a severe exam-centered ethos that generates two often cited criticisms, namely: psychological pressure and rote learning. In 2009, only 24.2 percent of high school graduates entered higher education institutions in China. Achieving a high NCEE score and matriculating to a good college or university are considered an essential route to social mobility in China. Coupled with China's one-child family policy, college degree inflation since the tremendous expansion of higher education in the late 1990s[8] has exacerbated the competition among high school students seeking admission into prestigious Chinese universities. Twelve hours of schoolwork a day is commonplace for high school students, not to mention extra weekend tutorials arranged by parents. Most students do not express a strong intrinsic motivation for learning. Many are under tremendous pressure, and most pressure centers on test anxiety and fear of failure, and sleep deprivation is reported as a widespread problem (Liu, Uchiyama, Okawa, & Kurita, 2000). Many Chinese researchers make the point that failure to bring the NCEE in alignment with both national reform policy and inquiry-based pedagogical and curricular reforms will severely hamper educational effectiveness and innovation.

To counter these phenomena, the MOE and other agencies have repeatedly called for *Suzhi* [9] education since the 1990s, aiming at transforming examination-centered education into quality education (State Council & Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, 1999; State Education Commission, 1997). *Suzhi* education emphasizes fostering an innovative spirit and practical ability by, for instance, reforming curricula to encourage a holistic approach to education (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). The effectiveness of the new mandate generally has remained at a low level (Zhao, 2007). It is in this reformative atmosphere that HSSSE-C has been developed to add student voices to China's secondary education assessment toolkit.

**Preliminary Findings: Disengaged Minds and Hearts**

Data from HSSSE-C's pilot survey administered in Shanghai in 2007 underscores challenges to quality teaching and learning reported in the existing literature on Chinese high schools. In open-ended responses, participating students questioned the meaning of high schools. They expressed frustration with rote learning, dull instruction, and anxiety about the anticipated fierce competition of the college entrance examination.

In response to the question "Why do you go to school?"[10] out of thirteen respondents, only one student stated, "It is fun." Five students reasoned that they go to school because it is a necessary means of social mobility. Four students said that "It is my parents' wish." When asked about whether they were bored in classes, and why, fifteen participants responded.[11] They listed reasons closely connected with a high school ethos centered on college examination preparation. Four participants described boring lessons; four participants described lack of sleep; three participants described low interest in study; one complained about too much homework. Only two students indicated personal difficulties. Typical complaints include, "The class is too quiet," "Not much response between teachers and students," and "I have much homework to do at night. It's very late whenever I finish it."

In the last open-ended question, in which participants were asked to provide additional comments, one respondent presented a disheartening portrayal of high school as, "*counterproductive to our well-being as teenagers. We are given almost no free time, not to mention enough time to rest. What we study is useless. We study for college entrance exams only, nothing else. My life as a high school student is disinteresting, what I do is to repeat this dull life every day.*" This quotation and similar responses, attest to the daunting challenges with which Chinese educators, policy makers, students and parents have been wrestling. These students expressed neither optimism nor appreciation for a school environment in which, from their perspective, independent learning barely thrives. Using student engagement as a window on the experience of students studying in one of China's most cosmopolitan, well-funded, educationally adaptive and intensely competitive environments raises important questions about the purpose and value of high school. As Zhang Minxuan, head of Shanghai PISA testified, Shanghai's PISA performance needs to be interpreted with confidence in the direction of Shanghai's educational reform, reflexivity in the realization of issues, gaps, new ideas and methods in educational practices in light of worldwide trends in student assessment - particularly the issue of study overload.

**Conclusion**

In response to the demands for quality education and global competitiveness, another wave of educational reform is rising in China. This wave is global in its visibility and centers on education quality assessment and improvement as indicated in the *Blueprint* and the *Action Plan.* The intent of the policy is quite clear in that more expansive and rigorous assessments involving various actors in education have been initiated. In addition, international assessments, such as PISA at the high school level and university rankings at the higher education level, have been sought out and applied in China. These existing assessment practices are outcome and/or reputation-driven and have overlooked the student experience and educational processes. The research projects summarized here shine a spotlight on student experience and direct attention in institutionally actionable ways to the subjects of education and educational processes. Student engagement as one focus of quality assessment respects students as masters of their own education and injects their experiences into the dialogue of educational effectiveness reform policy.

Successful adaptation of an American assessment tool to address key issues in educational development and reform in China illustrates that student-centered and process-driven assessment can cross boundaries and mutually inform highly diverse institutions and cultures. On the other hand, adaptation shows that China is actively responding to global trends in defining and redefining educational quality. Chinese reformers and educators consider exam-centered education as the key impediment to creating "innovative, practical and versatile professionals" (Blueprint, 2010). Tracking the development of student engagement across the secondary and post-secondary years will be crucial to understanding and assessing Chinese educational quality and the reforms designed to achieve it. To date, NSSE-C has drawn significant attention from policy makers, scholars, and student services personnel at both national and institutional levels, and has catalyzed a broader definition of educational quality and through changing quality assessment methods. Although HSSSE-C data from diverse cities and regions of China await final analysis, together with NSSE-C the survey tool enriches China's education quality assessment protocols. It provides the means for appreciating, documenting, and enhancing students' educative experiences to inform an educational system perceived to be both constrained by outmoded convention, whilst simultaneously ahead of its international competitors in several measures of significance.

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[1] This 2020 goal was put forward in 2007 at the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.
[2] The Action Plan's official title is *Notice of the State Council on the Experimental Sites for the National Educational Reform*.
[3] China's Blueprint references "education quality" fifty-one times, twenty-eight of which relate to strengthening education quality. Assessment/evaluation is mentioned thirty-nine times, among which ten references are pertinent to education quality assessment/evaluation. The Action Plan mentions education quality improvement six times among seventeen quality-relevant references.
[4] Adaptations fall into four categories: language-driven adaptation (e.g. the word "presentation" was paraphrased as "oral report" as there was not exact counterpart of the word in the Chinese language), adaptation to ensure local coverage of a concept (e.g. "student-faculty interaction" was substituted with "student-teacher interaction", as the concept of teacher is broader than faculty and more relevant in the context of Chinese higher education), adaptation to ensure questions are understood as intended (e.g. multiple versions of phrasing were tested in the field to make sure that survey respondents' understanding was consistent with what was intended by us researchers), and social, system-driven adaptation (e.g. the item asking about spiritual practices was removed as they were minimum at Chinese colleges and universities).

[5] Institutions in Project 985 are most prestigious universities in China. The Project was launched by the Ministry of Education soon after the then-President Jiang Zemin's speech in May 1998 that called for a number of world-class universities. The Project was named after the year (98) and the month (5) of Jiang's speech. Project 985 has over 40 institutions altogether, and the announced fund for these 985 institutions in total was approximately 30 billion RMB Yuan.

[6] It should be noted that initially, the HSSSE derived from the NSSE in 2004. Since 2005, it has been administered and developed by the CEEP.

[7] For example, examination scores in China largely determine college matriculation, thus the item to evaluate whether student parents converse about college application strategies in the HSSSE is irrelevant should Chinese students score below designated lines. Another example is questions of minimal relevance such as work for pay and AP classes in the HSSSE. Work for pay under sixteen is illegal in China. AP classes are rarely offered in Chinese high schools.

[8] Since the expansion, gross enrollment rate to higher education roared, but more competition comes if one wishes to enter prestigious universities.

[9] Scholarship lacks consensus on the definition and translation of the 'Suzhi' education. Common translation is quality education, quality-orientated education and diathesis education

[10] 119 students took the survey, but only 13 responded to this open-ended question.

[11] 15 students answered this open-ended question among 119 survey takers.