



# ASIIN – Thematic Analysis China (ESG 3.4)

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Synthesis of recurrent findings from external quality assurance activities

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This thematic analysis synthesises recurrent findings from ASIIN’s external quality assurance activities related to higher education provision in China. Its purpose is to identify, describe and analyse systemic patterns that emerge across multiple procedures and to reflect on their implications for quality assurance, both in terms of accountability and enhancement. The report does not assess individual institutions or programmes; instead, it focuses on recurring constellations and typical challenges that are relevant at system level.

The analysis draws on accumulated observations from programme accreditation and evaluation procedures conducted over several years. Only findings that occurred repeatedly across different contexts were considered. The material was reviewed and clustered thematically in order to identify common trends, areas of persistent difficulty, and transferable elements of good practice. Care was taken to formulate all statements in a way that prevents attribution to individual cases, institutions or persons.

The scope of the analysis covers higher education institutions with diverse profiles, including two- to three-year vocational and technical programmes, four-year bachelor programmes (with longer study durations in selected fields), as well as postgraduate provision at master’s and doctoral level. While governance structures and regulatory frameworks vary, comparable questions recur across procedures, particularly with regard to the coherence of qualification goals, workload-based credit allocation, competence-oriented assessment, transparency of documentation, recognition and mobility, access to academic resources, and the effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes.

## 1.1 Methodological note

This thematic analysis is based on a qualitative synthesis of recurrent findings from external quality assurance activities. Observations were considered “recurrent” only where comparable issues were identified across multiple procedures. The analysis follows a thematic approach rather than a country comparison and aims to make visible patterns that are relevant beyond individual cases. Thematic clustering was used to support a structured interpretation of the material and to facilitate reflection on implications for external quality assurance practice.

This report forms part of ASIIN’s regular reflective practice under ESG 3.4. By publishing thematic analyses of this kind, ASIIN seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of developments and challenges in higher education quality assurance and to inform the continuous development of its own external quality assurance methodologies.

# 2. CONTEXT: HE SYSTEM & FRAME

China’s higher education system has developed into a diversified landscape over time. It includes three-year higher vocational education at associate level, undergraduate education offered by universities (typically four years, with longer study durations in selected disciplines), and postgraduate education at master’s and doctoral level provided by authorised universities and research institutions.

At bachelor level and above, a dual-certificate system is in place: upon completion of studies, students receive a graduation certificate, while the academic degree is awarded separately through a degree certificate.

Since 2021, the scope and structure of vocational education have been further expanded and differentiated. A vertically articulated framework has been established, covering secondary vocational education (with lower secondary school completion as the entry point), higher vocational education at associate level (with upper secondary or secondary vocational completion as the entry point), higher vocational education at bachelor level (with upper secondary or associate-level vocational completion as the entry point), as well as professionally oriented master's programmes. This development has significantly increased the scale and systemic relevance of vocational and applied higher education and has, at the same time, raised new questions for quality assurance and evaluation practices.

Out of approximately 1,200 higher education institutions offering bachelor-level education or above (including vocational bachelor institutions), only 137 are officially designated as research-oriented universities, commonly referred to as the "Double First-Class" institutions. The remaining institutions are, in policy terms and in their own self-understanding, largely positioned as application-oriented universities. This structural characteristic has a direct impact on programme profiles, curriculum design, teaching approaches and the focus of quality assurance activities.

At macro level, higher education is governed through national steering by the Ministry of Education, while specific responsibilities—particularly those related to institutional oversight and implementation—are exercised by provincial authorities. Degree-awarding powers and the establishment of postgraduate programmes are subject to formal approval procedures. Different types and levels of higher education are subject to state-led quality evaluations, which provide a general framework for quality assurance across the system.

Quality evaluation in Chinese higher education has traditionally been government-led and institution-focused. A shift towards programme- and discipline-level evaluation began after China became a full signatory of the Washington Accord in 2016. At present, officially mandated programme accreditation is limited to three areas at bachelor level: engineering education (based on the Washington Accord), teacher education, and medical education. Outside these areas, quality assurance at programme level relies primarily on institutional evaluations and internal quality management mechanisms within higher education institutions.

Study programmes are usually organised on a semester basis, and most institutions apply a credit system. Bachelor programmes typically require the completion of approximately 140 to 170 credits. While credits are widely used as a structural element, their calculation and interpretation—particularly in relation to total student workload—vary across institutions. At bachelor level and above, final theses and thesis defences are generally required and constitute a formal component of degree completion.

Grading practices differ between institutions, although a nationally defined five-level grading scale is in place, ranging from "Excellent" to "Fail". In practice, grading outcomes are influenced by local assessment traditions and institution-specific regulations.

This institutional and regulatory context provides background information relevant to the thematic analysis presented in the following sections.

## **3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

### **3.1 Programme design, learning outcomes and curriculum**

#### **Observations**

Across a range of external quality assurance procedures, recurring inconsistencies are observed in the description of programme objectives and intended learning outcomes. Differences are frequently found between formal programme documents, such as talent cultivation plans, curriculum frameworks and module descriptions. In bilingual documentation, English versions of learning outcomes do not always correspond fully to the officially approved Chinese versions.

Curricula often include a considerable number of compulsory components that are not directly related to the disciplinary core of the programme, such as general education requirements or nationally prescribed elements. While these components serve broader educational purposes, their volume and placement within the curriculum vary and are not always transparently linked to the stated qualification profile.

#### **Analysis**

Inconsistencies across programme-related documents reduce transparency and make it difficult to demonstrate a coherent link between programme objectives, learning outcomes, curriculum content and assessment. Where different documents or language versions convey diverging messages, it becomes challenging for external reviewers, teaching staff and students alike to understand the intended profile of the programme and the competences graduates are expected to acquire.

A high proportion of compulsory non-disciplinary components can, depending on the field, limit curricular flexibility and constrain opportunities for subject-specific depth. In such cases, alignment between learning outcomes, curriculum structure and student workload is harder to establish. Although the formal adoption of an outcomes-based framework is evident, the operationalisation of learning outcomes in curriculum design often remains incomplete, reflecting a tension between established educational traditions and competence-oriented programme design.

#### **Transferable good practice (abstracted)**

Where programme objectives, learning outcomes and curricula are described consistently across all official documents and language versions, the programme profile becomes clearer and more transparent. Curricula that explicitly relate compulsory components to intended learning outcomes, and that provide sufficient space for disciplinary depth, offer a more robust basis for demonstrating outcome achievement and coherence in programme design.

### **3.2 Assessment design and competence orientation**

#### **Observations**

Across external quality assurance procedures, overall on-time graduation rates in Chinese higher education are consistently reported to be very high and, in many cases, close to 100%. Institutions attach considerable importance to the archiving of final examination papers and to maintaining a “reasonable” level of difficulty, partly in response to quality inspections conducted by education authorities.

At course level, it is not uncommon to observe a relatively high proportion of failing results in final written examinations (below 60 on a 100-point scale). However, when continuous assessment components—such as attendance, classroom participation, assignments and short written tasks—are included in the overall grade calculation, the proportion of failing grades is typically reduced to a very low level. Continuous assessment often accounts for around 40% of the final grade.

Chinese universities generally operate well-established examination regulations and procedures, and examinations are conducted in a controlled and formal manner. In engineering programmes in particular, assessment practices are frequently aligned with national engineering education accreditation standards. This is reflected in the systematic use of course-level learning outcome attainment analyses based on examination results.

### **Analysis**

The weighting of continuous assessment functions as an effective mechanism that allows institutions to balance the maintenance of formal examination standards with the expectation of high on-time graduation rates. In practice, continuous assessment serves as a mediating element between examination difficulty and progression requirements.

While course-level outcome attainment analyses are widely produced, particularly in engineering programmes, these analyses are often primarily framed from the perspective of the teaching staff. They tend to document whether predefined indicators have been met, rather than integrating evidence of what students have actually achieved across courses and at programme level. As a result, the linkage between individual course outcomes and the overall programme learning outcomes is not always made explicit to students.

In addition, external quality assurance procedures occasionally reveal that assessment-related documentation is produced in a largely formalistic manner. In such cases, programme coordinators or teaching staff comply with prescribed requirements for examination design and documentation, but the underlying purpose of assessment as evidence for learning outcome achievement is not fully reflected in assessment practice. This limits the contribution of assessment to a genuinely competence-oriented educational approach.

### **Transferable good practice (abstracted)**

Assessment systems that transparently integrate continuous assessment and final examinations, and that clearly explain the role of each component in relation to intended learning outcomes, provide a more coherent basis for competence-oriented assessment. Outcome attainment analyses that synthesise student achievement at course and programme level, and that are communicated to students in an accessible manner, strengthen the educational value of assessment and support meaningful implementation of outcome-based education.

### 3.3 Workload, credits and the role of the thesis

#### Observations

The credit systems applied in Chinese higher education are predominantly based on teaching workload rather than on student learning time. As a general rule, one Chinese credit corresponds to 16 teaching hours, excluding revision and examination periods. Student self-study, preparation for assessment and examination effort are not systematically included in credit calculations.

In the context of European or international accreditation procedures, some institutions attempt to introduce ECTS alongside the existing national credit system. In practice, however, this often remains at the level of written description in the self-assessment report rather than being implemented in curriculum design or credit calculation. A frequently observed approach is the use of fixed conversion ratios between national credits and ECTS, without an underlying analysis of actual student workload.

At bachelor level and above, relatively comprehensive formal regulations for the management of final theses are in place. Theses and related documentation are subject to archiving requirements and form part of the material reviewed by education authorities, similar to the archiving of examination papers.

While variations in thesis quality are common, a recurring observation across procedures is the very limited use of foreign-language, in particular English-language, academic literature, regardless of the overall quality level of the thesis.

#### Analysis

Credit calculation models that are centred on teaching hours make it difficult to establish a transparent relationship between credits and actual student workload. While such models are stable within the national context, they pose challenges in international accreditation settings, where credits are expected to reflect learning effort and learning outcomes.

Where ECTS is introduced without a workload-based analysis, and instead relies on mechanical credit conversion, it cannot fulfil its intended function as a tool for measuring and steering student workload. In such cases, ECTS remains a formal label rather than an instrument that informs curriculum planning, assessment design and quality assurance processes.

The relatively well-developed formal management of final theses contributes to procedural consistency and traceability. However, the observed variation in thesis quality, combined with limited engagement with international academic literature, suggests that the role of the thesis as a vehicle for research-based learning and academic skill development is not always fully realised. In particular at bachelor and professionally oriented master's level, the thesis is often treated primarily as a requirement for graduation rather than as an integral element of competence development.

#### Transferable good practice (abstracted)

Credit frameworks that move beyond teaching-hour calculations and systematically incorporate classroom instruction, self-study and assessment effort provide a more transparent and comparable

basis for credit allocation. When introducing ECTS, workload-based calculation and its use in curriculum design support meaningful alignment with European credit practices.

In relation to final theses, maintaining established procedural standards while strengthening expectations regarding research orientation and the use of international academic literature can enhance thesis quality and reinforce the role of the thesis as a comprehensive demonstration of learning outcomes.

### **3.4 Res: staff qualification, development and access to literature**

#### **Observations**

Clear differences are observed in staff qualification profiles between different types of higher education institutions. Among approximately 700 private universities and colleges in China, including around 400 institutions offering bachelor-level education, the proportion of staff holding doctoral degrees is structurally low. In some institutions, doctoral-level staff are limited to one or two individuals at programme or departmental level. By contrast, public universities typically report significantly higher proportions of doctoral staff, which in many cases exceed 40%.

In response to shortages in highly qualified staff, some institutions have introduced more flexible employment arrangements in recent years. These include the part-time engagement of senior or retired academics for teaching and supervision purposes, commonly referred to as “silver-age professors” or “weekend professors”.

Across external quality assurance procedures, limitations in access to international academic literature are also repeatedly observed. Electronic databases and journal subscriptions are, in some cases, insufficient to support research-informed teaching and academic work. At the same time, student theses frequently show a low level of engagement with foreign-language, in particular English-language, academic literature.

This pattern cannot be attributed solely to limitations in access to literature. In practice, limited English proficiency among both students and teaching staff is repeatedly identified as an additional factor restricting effective use of international academic resources. Even where basic access conditions are in place, foreign-language literature is often only marginally used in teaching and thesis work.

#### **Analysis**

The differences described above are closely linked to institutional status and employment frameworks. Private higher education institutions operate under enterprise-based employment models, whereas public universities are organised as public-service institutions. These differing arrangements result in structural differences with regard to salary stability, career development prospects and social security conditions.

As a consequence, private institutions face persistent structural constraints in attracting and retaining highly qualified academic staff. These constraints affect not only recruitment but also staff development. In practice, once teaching staff obtain doctoral degrees, they often reassess their career options and tend to move to public universities, further reinforcing instability in staff structures within private institutions.

This structural condition has direct implications for teaching quality and quality assurance. Low and unstable proportions of doctoral staff limit the continuity of curriculum development, restrict the scope for research-informed teaching and weaken internal academic leadership. In turn, this reduces the sustainability of quality enhancement measures over time.

### **Transferable good practice (abstracted)**

Sustainable access to international academic literature, combined with targeted support for foreign-language competence among staff and students, provides a stronger basis for research-informed teaching and the maintenance of academic standards. Structured staff development pathways that link qualification upgrading with retention mechanisms contribute to greater stability within academic teams.

In contexts where full-time recruitment of doctoral-level staff is constrained, carefully designed part-time appointment models—such as senior or weekend professorships—can support quality enhancement when they are embedded in programme development, supervision structures and internal quality assurance processes, rather than used as isolated compensatory measures.

## **3.5 Transparency and documentation**

### **Observations**

Across external quality assurance procedures, challenges related to transparency and documentation are recurrently observed. A key difficulty arises from the fact that English is the working language of international accreditation procedures, while the daily operation of most Chinese higher education institutions—including teaching, administration and public information—is conducted primarily in Chinese. As a result, relevant information is often not readily available in English or is only partially translated for the purposes of accreditation.

This language-related barrier is further compounded by differences in institutional practice and cultural expectations regarding transparency. In many cases, information that is internally available is not routinely published or structured for external access. As a consequence, demonstrating transparency and comprehensive documentation in a manner comparable to European higher education practice presents additional challenges for Chinese institutions.

With regard to graduate documentation, the Diploma Supplement represents an established instrument within European higher education. In the Chinese context, however, it remains a relatively new concept. Its introduction and implementation vary considerably across institutions. Where used, the Diploma Supplement has the potential to communicate graduates' achieved competence profiles to employers or further study programmes, but this potential is not always fully realised.

### **Analysis**

The coexistence of different working languages and documentation cultures affects the practical assessment of transparency in international accreditation procedures. Even where institutions maintain extensive internal documentation, the absence of systematically prepared English-language materials limits their external visibility. This creates a structural gap between existing practices and the expectations applied in European quality assurance contexts.

The handling of the Diploma Supplement illustrates this gap in a particularly clear manner. Where its introduction is treated primarily as a formal requirement, the document tends to replicate basic programme information without providing meaningful insight into learning outcomes or graduate competences. By contrast, effective use of the Diploma Supplement depends on a clear understanding of its role within the overall educational cycle, linking intended learning outcomes, achieved competences and employability.

### **Transferable good practice (abstracted)**

Transparency is strengthened when key academic and regulatory documents are systematically prepared in the working language of international quality assurance procedures and made accessible to external stakeholders. Clear internal responsibilities for documentation and regular review of published information support consistent practice.

When introduced as part of a coherent qualification framework, the Diploma Supplement can serve as a valuable instrument for communicating graduates' competence profiles beyond the institution. Its effective use requires institutional commitment and a shared understanding of its function within the quality assurance and programme development cycle, rather than a purely formal or symbolic adoption.

## **3.6 Recognition and mobility**

### **Observations**

Across external quality assurance procedures, student mobility at programme level is generally limited. In many programmes, incoming and outgoing mobility remains marginal, and in some cases mobility-related data are incomplete or entirely absent. Where mobility figures are reported, they often relate to very small numbers of students and lack systematic monitoring over time.

At the same time, various nationally or ministerially driven qualification schemes and certificates are in place, often coordinated by the Ministry of Education or other relevant authorities. These external qualifications are widely recognised within the domestic context and are considered by institutions to enhance graduate employability. However, their relationship to programme learning outcomes and international mobility pathways is not always clearly articulated.

### **Analysis**

The limited level of student mobility reflects a combination of structural, curricular and regulatory factors. Highly standardised curricula, tightly sequenced study plans and heavy credit loads restrict flexibility for mobility windows. In addition, differences in academic calendars, language requirements and recognition practices further constrain mobility opportunities.

It is nevertheless evident that institutions seeking European accreditation pursue explicit internationalisation strategies. Engagement in international quality assurance procedures is typically embedded in broader institutional objectives related to global visibility, international cooperation and recognition. The persistence of low mobility levels therefore points to a gap between strategic intentions and programme-level implementation.

Externally defined qualifications that are primarily oriented towards domestic labour market requirements may strengthen employability within the national context, but they do not necessarily support international mobility or recognition. Where such qualifications are not integrated into programme structures in a transparent manner, they may further limit curricular flexibility and reinforce inward-oriented educational trajectories.

#### **Transferable good practice (abstracted)**

Programme-level mobility is strengthened where curricula deliberately include flexibility windows and where mobility data are systematically collected and reviewed. Transparent recognition procedures and clearly defined learning agreements support realistic mobility planning and improve the reliability of reported data.

External qualifications that are aligned with labour market needs can contribute positively to employability when their role is clearly defined in relation to programme learning outcomes. Where such qualifications are integrated in a transparent manner and do not constrain curricular flexibility, they can complement internationalisation efforts rather than compete with them.

### **3.7 Quality processes, data and feedback loops**

#### **Observations**

Across external quality assurance procedures, most institutions have established formal internal quality assurance structures at institutional and programme level. These typically include regulations, committees, regular reporting cycles and standardised templates covering programme design, assessment, student feedback and teaching evaluation.

At programme level, quality assurance activities are often organised around periodic documentation exercises, such as self-assessment reports, annual reviews or inspection-related materials. While large amounts of data are collected, their use for systematic analysis and follow-up varies. In some cases, quality assurance is primarily perceived as a compliance-related task rather than as a continuous improvement process.

Student feedback mechanisms are widely in place, but their role within internal quality assurance systems is not always clearly defined. Feedback results are not consistently linked to documented improvement measures, and evidence of closed feedback loops is uneven across programmes.

#### **Analysis**

The predominance of formalised procedures reflects a strong emphasis on structural compliance. However, where internal quality assurance focuses mainly on documentation and reporting, its potential to support substantive quality enhancement remains limited. The absence of clearly articulated feedback loops weakens the link between identified issues, decision-making and implemented improvements.

At programme level, quality assurance processes are often fragmented. Responsibilities for data collection, analysis and follow-up actions may be distributed across different units without sufficient

coordination. As a result, recurring issues—such as misalignment between learning outcomes, assessment and workload—may be repeatedly identified without leading to sustained change.

Limited integration of student feedback further reduces the effectiveness of internal quality assurance. Where feedback is collected but not visibly acted upon, trust in quality assurance processes diminishes, and opportunities for meaningful improvement are missed.

#### **Transferable good practice (abstracted)**

Internal quality assurance systems are more effective where responsibilities for analysis, decision-making and follow-up are clearly defined at programme level. Documented feedback loops that link evidence, measures and review outcomes support continuous improvement and reduce the risk of purely formal compliance.

When student feedback is systematically integrated into internal quality assurance processes and results are communicated transparently, internal quality assurance gains credibility and relevance. Regular reflection on the effectiveness of quality measures strengthens the connection between quality assurance activities and programme development.

## **4. CROSS-CUTTING TRENDS**

Across the thematic areas analysed in Sections 3.1 to 3.7, several cross-cutting trends can be identified. These trends do not relate to individual institutions or programmes, but reflect recurring structural patterns observed across multiple external quality assurance procedures.

A first recurring trend concerns the gap between formal frameworks and substantive implementation. Outcome-oriented concepts, workload-based credit systems, competence-oriented assessment, internal quality assurance mechanisms and internationalisation strategies are widely adopted at the level of formal documentation. However, their practical implementation at programme level often remains partial. In several thematic areas, procedures and instruments exist, but their underlying purpose and interconnections are not always fully operationalised in teaching, assessment and programme management.

A second cross-cutting trend relates to the predominance of compliance-oriented practices. Many quality-related activities are shaped by external regulatory requirements and inspection expectations. As a result, documentation, reporting and archiving play a central role. While this contributes to procedural order and traceability, it also increases the risk that quality assurance is perceived primarily as a formal obligation rather than as a tool for continuous improvement. This pattern is evident in assessment documentation, outcome attainment analyses and internal quality assurance processes.

A third trend concerns limited integration across different elements of programme design. Learning outcomes, assessment methods, workload allocation, thesis requirements and external qualifications are frequently addressed as separate components. Systematic alignment across these elements is not consistently demonstrated. This fragmentation reduces transparency for students and external stakeholders and weakens the coherence of programme profiles.

A further cross-cutting trend is the tension between internationalisation ambitions and structural constraints at programme level. Institutions seeking European accreditation typically articulate clear internationalisation strategies. At the same time, limited student mobility, language barriers, curriculum rigidity and constrained access to international academic resources restrict the translation of strategic objectives into programme-level practice.

Finally, differences in institutional context play a significant role across all thematic areas. Variations in institutional status, governance models and staffing structures—particularly between public and private institutions—shape the conditions under which quality assurance measures are implemented. These contextual factors help explain why similar challenges recur across procedures, even where institutional commitment to quality enhancement is evident.

Taken together, these cross-cutting trends highlight that many of the observed challenges are structural rather than isolated. They point to the importance of addressing coherence, integration and purpose across quality assurance instruments, rather than focusing solely on the existence of formal procedures.

## 5. GOOD PRACTICE

The following section consolidates and rearticulates transferable good practices that have already been identified in the thematic analysis, without introducing new material.

Across the external quality assurance procedures analysed, a number of good practices can be identified. These practices are not uniformly applied, but where they are observed, they contribute to greater coherence, transparency and effectiveness in programme design and quality assurance.

A first area of good practice concerns consistency in programme documentation. Programmes in which learning outcomes, curriculum structures, assessment methods and workload assumptions are described coherently across all official documents—both in the national language and in English—demonstrate clearer programme profiles. This consistency supports shared understanding among teaching staff, students and external stakeholders.

Good practice is also observed in assessment design where different assessment formats are deliberately combined and explicitly linked to intended learning outcomes. In such cases, assessment is used not only to measure knowledge acquisition but also to support the development and demonstration of competences. Clear regulations for final theses, including defined supervision arrangements and transparent assessment criteria, further strengthen academic standards.

With regard to workload and credits, programmes that base credit allocation on realistic estimates of total student workload—taking into account contact time, self-study and assessment effort—provide a more transparent and balanced study structure. Where credit allocation is periodically reviewed using student feedback and workload data, imbalances can be identified and addressed in a timely manner.

In the area of resources, good practice is evident where institutions ensure stable access to international academic literature and actively support the use of foreign-language sources in teaching and

thesis work. Targeted measures to enhance language competence among staff and students strengthen research-informed teaching and contribute to improved academic quality.

Positive practices are further observed in internal quality assurance where feedback loops are clearly documented and responsibilities for follow-up actions are defined at programme level. When student feedback and evaluation results are systematically analysed and linked to concrete improvement measures, internal quality assurance moves beyond formal compliance and supports continuous development.

Finally, good practice in transparency and documentation is characterised by the systematic preparation and publication of key academic information in a form accessible to external stakeholders. Where instruments such as the Diploma Supplement are used to communicate graduates' achieved competences in a clear and meaningful way, they enhance transparency and support recognition beyond the institution.

## 6. PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Despite the presence of identifiable good practices, a number of challenges persist across external quality assurance procedures. These challenges are not limited to individual programmes or institutions, but reflect structural patterns that continue to affect the effectiveness of programme design, delivery and quality assurance.

A recurring challenge concerns the gap between formal compliance and substantive implementation. While outcome-oriented frameworks, internal quality assurance structures and documentation requirements are widely in place, their practical use often remains limited. Instruments such as learning outcome matrices, workload calculations or attainment analyses are frequently produced for reporting purposes, but their integration into day-to-day teaching, assessment and programme management is uneven.

A second persistent challenge relates to limited coherence across programme elements. Learning outcomes, assessment methods, credit allocation, thesis requirements and external qualifications are often developed and reviewed in parallel rather than in an integrated manner. This weak alignment reduces transparency for students and external stakeholders and makes it difficult to demonstrate a clear and coherent programme profile.

Resource-related constraints continue to shape quality development. In particular, limited access to international academic literature, uneven foreign-language competence among staff and students, and imbalanced staff qualification profiles—especially in private institutions—restrict the scope for research-informed teaching and sustainable academic leadership. Short-term compensatory measures, while helpful, do not fully address underlying structural constraints.

Student mobility remains a further persistent challenge at programme level. Highly standardised curricula, heavy workload structures and limited recognition flexibility reduce opportunities for mobility, despite articulated institutional internationalisation strategies. As a result, mobility often remains marginal and insufficiently embedded in programme design.

Finally, internal quality assurance processes continue to face challenges related to fragmentation and follow-up. While data collection is extensive, systematic analysis, prioritisation and implementation of improvement measures are not consistently evident. Feedback loops are not always closed, and recurring issues may be identified repeatedly without leading to sustained change.

Taken together, these persistent challenges indicate that further progress depends less on the introduction of additional instruments and more on strengthening coherence, integration and purpose within existing quality assurance frameworks.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS & LIGHT RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented in this thematic analysis carry implications for both higher education institutions and external quality assurance practice. They point less to the need for additional instruments and more to the importance of strengthening coherence, integration and purpose within existing frameworks. These implications should be understood in light of the structural nature of the challenges identified above.

For higher education institutions, the analysis highlights the value of moving beyond formal compliance towards more integrated implementation. Where learning outcomes, assessment, workload allocation, thesis requirements and internal quality assurance are treated as interconnected elements rather than as separate tasks, programme profiles become clearer and quality development more sustainable. Light adjustments—such as clarifying responsibilities at programme level, consolidating documentation and using existing data more systematically—can already support meaningful improvement without structural overhaul.

In the area of internationalisation, the findings suggest that programme-level implementation requires particular attention. Institutional strategies for international engagement may benefit from clearer translation into realistic curricular arrangements, including flexibility windows, transparent recognition practices and targeted language support. Even modest, well-defined mobility opportunities can contribute to international learning experiences when they are coherently embedded in programme design.

With regard to resources, the analysis underlines that access to international academic literature and language competence are closely interrelated. Investment in infrastructure alone is insufficient if not accompanied by measures that support effective use. Similarly, staffing constraints—particularly in private institutions—call for approaches that balance short-term solutions with longer-term capacity building.

For external quality assurance agencies, including ASIIN, the findings imply the importance of maintaining a clear focus on substance and coherence. Evaluation processes benefit from distinguishing between the existence of formal structures and their actual use in educational practice. Thematic analyses of recurrent findings can support this focus by making structural patterns visible beyond individual procedures.

Finally, the analysis suggests that transparency expectations need to be applied with sensitivity to contextual differences, while maintaining clear reference points. Supporting institutions in under-

standing the purpose of instruments such as outcome frameworks, workload-based credits or the Diploma Supplement can facilitate more meaningful implementation and reduce the risk of purely formal adoption.

## 8. LIMITATIONS & NEXT STEPS

This thematic analysis is based on recurrent findings from external quality assurance procedures conducted over a defined period and within specific regulatory and institutional contexts. As such, it does not aim to provide a comprehensive or statistically representative overview of higher education provision in China. The analysis focuses on patterns that emerged repeatedly across procedures and therefore does not capture the full diversity of institutional practices.

The findings are also shaped by the scope and nature of the underlying procedures. They primarily reflect programme-level observations derived from accreditation and evaluation activities and do not systematically cover broader institutional strategies or policy developments beyond their relevance to programme quality assurance. In addition, the analysis relies on available documentation and stakeholder interviews conducted in the context of external quality assurance, which may vary in depth and completeness across cases.

Language and documentation constraints constitute a further limitation. As international procedures are conducted in English, the analysis is necessarily influenced by the extent to which institutions provide translated materials. This may affect the visibility of internal practices that are well established in the national context but less explicitly documented for external audiences.

As a next step, future thematic analyses may further refine the methodological approach by extending the observation period and by incorporating additional comparative perspectives. Deeper differentiation between types of institutions and programmes may support more nuanced interpretation of recurrent patterns. Where appropriate, thematic focus areas may be adjusted to reflect emerging developments in higher education and quality assurance practice.

Within ASIIN's external quality assurance activities, the findings of this analysis will be used to inform ongoing methodological reflection and to support consistency in evaluation practice. Periodic thematic reviews of this kind contribute to organisational learning and help ensure that external quality assurance remains responsive to structural developments while maintaining a clear focus on substantive quality.