

Teacher Education Accreditation in China: A Key Initiative for the High-Quality Development of Physical Education Programs

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Abstract

The high-quality development of physical education programs is an integral component of building a high-quality education system, and Teacher Education Accreditation in China provides a solid foundation for such development. This study combines normative analysis with policy-text interpretation to examine the substantive implications of teacher education accreditation, and further proposes strategies for advancement: strengthening the accreditation regime for physical education programs, establishing a dedicated accreditation body for the field, and encouraging universities to undertake comprehensive reforms in accordance with accreditation requirements.

Keywords

Teacher Education Accreditation in China; physical education programs; quality assurance.

1. Introduction

In October 2017, the Ministry of Education issued the Interim Measures for the Accreditation of Teacher-Training Programs in Regular Institutions of Higher Education (hereinafter the “Measures”) and the Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher-Training Programs (hereinafter the “Standards”), officially launching the accreditation endeavor and establishing it as a key initiative and fundamental pathway for advancing the high-quality development of teacher education^[1]. As an important component of teacher-training programs, physical education programs have supplied a large number of PE teachers and administrators for China’s basic education and relevant authorities^[2]. Accreditation has created an opportunity for the standardized development of these programs, aiming to correct training deficiencies, promote quality enhancement, and lay a solid foundation for cultivating excellent physical education teachers^[3]. Therefore, examining what “Teacher Education Accreditation in China” entails, why it matters, and how it should be advanced are issues that merit close attention in promoting the high-quality development of physical education programs.

2. Overview of Teacher Education Accreditation in China

Teacher education accreditation is an external evaluation conducted by specialized accreditation agencies, in accordance with accreditation standards, of the quality of talent cultivation in teacher-training programs. Its purpose is to ascertain whether the comprehensive competencies of the students trained by a program—now and for a period of time to come—meet the requirements set by the accreditation standards.

2.1. Core Principles

“Student-centered, outcomes-based, and continuous improvement” are the core concepts that run through the accreditation of teacher-education programs in Chinese universities. These concepts express the symbolic dimension of the accreditation regime: they place students at the center of the program’s internal logic; they invoke market logic to align teacher-candidates’

professional competencies with societal needs; and, through the interaction of state-led logic and professional autonomy, they underpin a teacher-education quality-assurance system that integrates internal and external monitoring.

The “student-centered” accreditation philosophy requires training institutions to respect the developmental regularities of teacher-candidates, allocating educational resources, organizing curricula, and delivering instruction with teacher-candidates at the center^[4]. It highlights a professional logic oriented to the sustainable development of their professional quality. At the pre-service stage, it recognizes teacher-candidates’ agency, allocates instructional resources around learning outcomes, attends to students’ needs and individualized development, and stimulates their initiative. From the perspective of teacher-education professionalization, the hallmark of professional education is the mutual embedding of theory and practice^[5]: a well-structured theoretical curriculum secures the knowledge base required for professional growth, while a triadic collaborative training mechanism—linking universities, local governments, and primary/secondary schools—supports the cultivation of practical competencies. Professional logic rests on professional knowledge and capability and requires ongoing professional education for further development. Teacher-education accreditation aligns with the logic of professional growth by using graduate and employer satisfaction as key evidence and by incorporating in-service professional development into the accreditation system. In doing so, it transcends the segmental boundaries of pre-service teacher education and fosters the integrated development of professional competencies before and after employment.

The outcomes-based philosophy emphasizes orienting teacher education toward teacher-candidates’ learning results. With reference to the core competency requirements for graduates, it evaluates the quality of talent cultivation in teacher-education programs, aligns educational supply with the needs of multiple stakeholders, and reflects a market logic that begins with consumers’ quality requirements. In this framework, “outputs” encompass both student-level outputs and institutional outputs. Student-level outputs refer to the cognitive, skills, and affective attainments achieved after a complete learning experience; institutional outputs primarily assess achievements in quality assurance, requiring institutions to gather evidence of students’ competencies to substantiate these attainments. An outcomes-based approach specifies graduate competencies in advance and then backward-designs curricula and instruction to ensure teacher-candidates’ personal outputs, thereby expressing a market logic in which educational provision meets learner (consumer) needs. At the same time, by evaluating institutional output quality through evidence of teacher-candidates’ competencies, the approach aims to satisfy the quality demands of the employment market—as a consumer of teacher-education “products”—and to use industry needs to recalibrate the cultivation system, narrowing gaps between educational supply and labor-market demand. Designing the cultivation system and assessing quality in line with market logic helps prevent a disconnect between university training and market needs that can leave graduates underprepared and lead to “opting out of teaching.”

The continuous-improvement philosophy in teacher-education accreditation emphasizes comprehensive, whole-process evaluation of instruction in teacher-training programs and the application of evaluation results to pedagogical enhancement, thereby driving ongoing improvements in talent cultivation quality. It seeks to prioritize state-led logic for governing external quality, use evaluation feedback as a lever for quality enhancement, and, supplemented by professional logic, promote internal self-evaluation—motivating training institutions to refine their cultivation and assessment systems and to form a dynamic quality-monitoring mechanism that links internal and external processes. In China, teacher-education accreditation is government-led in constructing the quality-assurance mechanism: the state establishes objective, fair, persuasive, and highly operable norms, requires universities to

undergo assessment against predetermined standards, and interprets higher scores as higher quality. Otherwise, institutions are expected to reflect on deficiencies in light of the norms—using compliance as the basis for quality supervision in teacher education^[6]. China's teacher-education accreditation system establishes the primacy of the state logic in three dimensions—standards, procedures, and institutions—thereby safeguarding the central role of the state within the teacher-education quality-assurance regime and promoting high-quality development of teacher-training programs through unified quality benchmarks. The Ministry of Education issues uniform accreditation standards and procedures that define the basic requirements for teacher-education programs; expert accreditation committees are constituted to evaluate whether programs meet these standards; and state authority guarantees and supervises teacher-education quality nationwide. In this framework, the principal actor in accreditation is the state, supported by specialized educational evaluation agencies and basic-education institutions. Anchored in top-level, standards-based design, this structure forms an external, government-led yet socially participatory quality-assurance mechanism.

2.2. Standards for Teacher Education Accreditation in China

From the three-level, three-category evaluation system established in October 2017—Level I, II, and III standards for preschool, primary, and secondary teacher education—to the October 2019 establishment of Level I, II, and III standards for vocational–technical teacher education and special education, China's teacher-education accreditation has, at the top-level design stage, built an accreditation regime that is three-tiered and progressive, covers five categories, and runs in parallel at two program levels (associate and bachelor's). It also operates under a ministerial–provincial co-governance mechanism that combines unified national guidance with appropriately delegated implementation, achieving a virtuous cycle in which theory guides practice and practice refines theory. The result is a “three tiers, five categories, two levels” accreditation system.

The Level I accreditation standards serve as the national entry threshold for establishing teacher-education programs; they are the required quality monitoring indicators that preschool, primary, and secondary teacher-education programs must meet. These standards are organized across four dimensions: curriculum and instruction, collaboration and practicum, faculty, and supporting conditions. The Level II accreditation standards define the qualified (baseline) level. They comprise 8 first-level indicators—program goals and positioning, graduate competency requirements, curriculum structure, teaching practicum, faculty strength, internal and external supporting conditions, quality assurance across training stages, and student development—together with 38 second-level (sub)indicators. The Level III accreditation standards specify the excellence level. They include the same 8 first-level indicators as Level II, with 42 second-level indicators (and 41 in the case of preschool education).

For vocational–technical teacher education and special education, the Level I accreditation indicators share the same monitoring purpose as those for preschool, primary, and secondary teacher education. Organized across the four dimensions of curriculum and instruction, collaboration and practicum, faculty, and supporting conditions, they delineate 18 and 16 core institutional monitoring indicators, respectively, to promote nationwide strengthening of these programs and ensure their sound development. The Level II accreditation standards for both fields represent the qualified (baseline) level. Along the dimensions of program goals and positioning, graduate competency requirements, curriculum structure, teaching practicum, faculty strength, internal and external supporting conditions, quality assurance across training stages, and student development, they specify 42 and 38 second-level indicators, respectively. The Level III accreditation standards likewise target excellence in program quality. Drawing on

the same first-level indicator framework as Level II, they set out 46 and 42 second-level indicators for vocational–technical teacher education and special education, respectively, with the aim of establishing world-class quality benchmarks aligned with international standards.

3. The Value Implications of the Accreditation of Physical Education Programs

3.1. Establishing National Standards and Building a Multi-Level Quality Assurance System

As a state-established quality assurance system for teacher education, Teacher Education Accreditation in China is guided by the principle of “building a teacher-education quality monitoring and accreditation system that is Chinese in character and world-class in standard, and conducting tiered, category-based accreditation of teacher-training programs”^[7]. Through accreditation, the state conducts routine, data-driven monitoring of basic operating requirements for teacher-education programs with a baseline (“floor-setting”) function, and implements periodic accreditation at the qualified (Level II) and excellence (Level III) tiers. In this way, it both secures a safety net for teacher education and enables differentiated development, while highlighting distinctive strengths and enhancing international visibility and competitiveness. Applied to the field of physical education programs, all universities offering such programs must undergo Level I accreditation—the state’s fundamental “floor” to guarantee the baseline of program construction. Falling short of Level I requirements signifies that a university’s physical education program is wholly noncompliant. Level II and Level III accreditations are voluntary: Level II ensures that teaching quality meets the national threshold for qualification, whereas Level III is designed to benchmark against advanced international standards in PE teacher education—using evaluation to drive excellence and to forge first-rate quality exemplars. In practice, the vast majority of institutions pursue Level II accreditation to consolidate the foundation of China’s PE teacher-education quality and to secure the basic performance line in teacher preparation. A smaller number of programs with longer histories and stronger capacities may seek Level III accreditation; these represent the highest quality of China’s PE teacher education and embody its distinctive characteristics.

Therefore, through accreditation of physical education programs, the state can establish a clearly tiered quality-assurance system for PE teacher education that integrates baseline (floor-setting) + qualified + excellence levels. This three-tier accreditation—each tier emphasizing different priorities—not only underscores the procedural and developmental nature of accreditation for physical education programs, but also reflects the linkage across stages within the quality-assurance regime, forming a coherent, integrated system. In addition, in January 2018 the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education issued the National Standards for Undergraduate Teaching Quality in Sports Disciplines at Regular Institutions of Higher Education. These standards set normative quality requirements—covering training objectives and specifications, length of study, credits and degrees, curriculum structure and notes, faculty, teaching conditions, and quality management—for seven undergraduate majors in sport, including physical education. Although these requirements differ from program accreditation per se, they have laid the groundwork for promoting standardized and normalized construction of PE programs to meet accreditation expectations, thereby accelerating the formation—at the national level—of a comprehensive quality-assurance system for physical education programs.

3.2. Establishing Dynamic Monitoring to Help Universities Allocate Program Resources Rationally

From the trajectory of China's higher education, the system has shifted from elite education to mass education, realizing the vision of becoming a major higher-education country. However, expansion in quantity does not automatically translate into improved quality; consequently, advancing the building of a powerful country in higher education has become a new imperative for China's higher-education development^[8]. Although this endeavor manifests across multiple dimensions—ideas, institutions, and structure^[9]—its core remains the enhancement of educational quality^[10]. This necessitates a transition from “pursuing quantity in higher education” to “pursuing quality in higher education.” While higher education is a vast system, its development is ultimately carried by the construction of academic programs (majors) at universities. In the past, institutions focused on adding new programs and seldom took the initiative to suspend admissions to undergraduate programs with low training quality—a tendency especially evident among local undergraduate institutions pursuing rapid expansion or striving, sometimes indiscriminately, to build comprehensive universities.

Although an elimination mechanism for program construction has been initiated in recent years, it has thus far focused mainly on the dynamic adjustment of master's and doctoral degree authorization points, and a complete mechanism has yet to take shape at the undergraduate level. Against this backdrop, implementing accreditation for physical education programs can provide universities with scientifically grounded, authoritative decision-making information: it helps institutions monitor the quality of their PE program construction, understand their national standing, identify strengths and weaknesses, and assess potential advantages and development prospects. This, in turn, enables rational allocation of policies, funding, personnel, and material resources—avoiding a “cast-the-net-wide” approach that distributes scarce higher-education resources evenly across all programs, which runs counter to the inner logic of higher-education development. Based on accreditation results, universities may, as appropriate, discontinue underperforming physical education programs whose quality is very low. For institutions whose PE programs are of average quality, the findings indicate directions for improvement: they can adopt a short-board (weakest-link) remediation approach to achieve focused breakthroughs, enhance the standardization and overall level of program development, and avoid the “wooden-barrel effect”. For high-quality PE programs, resources can be concentrated for flagship development, building model programs that highlight the institution's distinctive strengths and better serve talent cultivation. In short, the dynamic monitoring of PE program development enabled by accreditation is an effective means to advance normalization, standardization, and quality enhancement in program construction.

3.3. Strengthening Internal Drivers to Enhance the Quality of Talent Cultivation in the Program

Although teacher-education accreditation is an external evaluation, the Ministry of Education places greater emphasis on using accreditation to press for internal quality assurance and the fulfillment of primary responsibilities. If a program fails to pursue connotation-driven development, tap internal potential, and activate endogenous drivers, even the most refined external evaluation will have limited effect—and may even create counter-incentives. Policy documents highlight the principle of evidentiary demonstration: all materials must be supported by verifiable evidence rather than self-report. Programs with sound governance and thorough preparation need only organize existing materials in accordance with the rules; however, years of insufficiently targeted evaluation have often obscured nonstandard practices—for example, weak implementation of “triadic” collaborative training and the dual-supervisor system—a situation especially common among physical education programs established in haste in recent years^[11]. From the standpoint of program development,

participating in accreditation is precisely an opportunity to normalize construction, enhance reputation, and improve the quality of talent cultivation.

The benefits of accreditation for physical education programs fall chiefly into three areas. First, enhanced standardization. Earlier evaluations were mostly at the institutional level, with insufficiently granular requirements for programs. The current standards provide clear guidance through 8 first-level and 42 second-level indicators—covering program objectives, graduation requirements, curriculum and instruction, collaboration and practicum, faculty, supporting conditions, quality assurance, and student development—thereby facilitating targeted improvement. Second, reputational gains. Accreditation confers professional recognition, strengthens a program's influence and capacity for self-development, and yields tangible advantages in student recruitment quality, directional adjustments, and resource aggregation^[12]. Third, resource acquisition. Universities' investment patterns vary markedly, and under the "Double First-Class" framework, marginal disciplines are often squeezed. If sport-related programs achieve Level II/III accreditation, the conclusions can be leveraged to secure policies and funding for short-board remediation and structural optimization, catalyzing leapfrog development, cultivating talent aligned with societal needs, and creating a virtuous cycle.

4. Strategies for Advancing Teacher Education Accreditation in China

4.1. Strengthening the Accreditation Regime for Physical Education Programs

The institutional development of accreditation for physical education programs is, in essence, a response to the need for "institutional supply." Drawing on David Feeny's idea of leveraging governmental advantages for rapid provision, a government-led, coercive institutional change should serve as the backbone, while simultaneously incorporating the induced change that arises from individuals or groups who advocate reforms based on emergent opportunities. This top-down–bottom-up coupling should cultivate a calibrated tension that helps reconcile diverse interests. To avoid path dependence and execution gaps, the government should issue a coherent suite of top-level policies and supporting rules—for example, a Master Plan for Accreditation of Physical Education Programs, Guidelines for First-Class Course Development, Guidelines on Building "Dual-Qualified" Faculty, Accreditation Agency Qualification Guidelines, and operational documents on "advancing dynamic program adjustment based on accreditation results." These should clarify standards, procedures, and evidentiary requirements, thereby creating an implementable policy environment. At the same time, an objective and transparent oversight mechanism with quantitative indicators should be established to ensure procedural fairness and outcome effectiveness. Coordination should be strengthened across legal, financial, and publicity domains to mitigate conflicts between existing interest structures and institutional innovation, foster a "logic of synergy," and enhance the overall effectiveness of quality assurance.

In institutional change, publicity and opinion guidance deserve close attention. Confronted with "latent dissemination" driven by self-media and a multi-node diffusion pattern, the competent authorities should employ press briefings, informational brochures, and integrated media campaigns to deepen stakeholders' understanding of the meaning of accreditation, elicit positive bottom-up responses, and convert information asymmetries and misunderstandings into momentum for reform. The relationship between accreditation and existing standards should be clarified to avoid siloed implementation. The *Physical Education and Health Curriculum Standards for Primary and Secondary Schools* and the *National Standards for Undergraduate Teaching Quality in Sports Disciplines at Regular Institutions of Higher Education* set baseline requirements from the perspectives of basic-education pedagogy and higher-education quality control, respectively. When refining the *Interim Measures for Accreditation*,

the linkage between these documents and program accreditation should be explicitly specified, embedding the relevant requirements into accreditation indicators and review foci and prioritizing scrutiny of each program's attainment of the above standards—thus ensuring institutionalized coherence and mutual reinforcement.

4.2. Establishing a Dedicated Accreditation Body for Physical Education Programs

According to the list of agencies qualified to conduct teacher-education accreditation released by the Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education in May 2018, in addition to the Center itself there are ten provincial evaluation agencies—with qualifications in Beijing, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, Henan, Hubei, and Chongqing. However, most of these agencies are units directly under provincial education departments (education commissions). Their work is largely government-commissioned; the evaluation subjects, indicators, procedures, and funding are determined by the government; and both the conclusions and expert rosters require administrative approval. As such, these agencies primarily handle organizational, liaison, and service functions and find it difficult to operate as fully autonomous “third-party” bodies. The National Expert Committee for the Accreditation of Teacher-Training Programs in Higher Education established by the Ministry of Education is likewise an official body, oriented toward guidance, planning, and approval rather than serving as an independent entity that implements accreditation.

Given China's education governance structure, evaluation and accreditation cannot be entrusted entirely to fully independent third parties. Nevertheless, cultivating “government-recognized yet relatively independent” third-party evaluation organizations should be the direction of travel—both aligning with international trends and facilitating greater mutual recognition abroad. Drawing on the experience of engineering education accreditation, one option is to launch a “China Association for Accreditation of Physical Education Programs.” This body could register with the civil affairs authorities as a national social organization to ensure independence, while receiving professional guidance from the Department of Teachers' Affairs of the Ministry of Education and the Expert Committee on Accreditation of Teacher-Training Programs. In terms of governance, the association could establish an Academic Committee, an Expert Selection Committee, an Accreditation Decision Review Committee, and a Secretariat, responsible respectively for academic advisory functions, expert recruitment, adjudication of accreditation conclusions, and day-to-day operations. Under the Secretariat, specialized divisions—Academic, Publicity, Training, General Administration, Accreditation, and International Affairs—would coordinate standards research, public communication, personnel training, concrete reviews, and international alignment. Through such a quasi-third-party mechanism, the accreditation of physical education programs can be further professionalized and scientized, thereby enhancing credibility and international influence.

4.3. University-Wide Reform in Line with Accreditation Requirements

Professional accreditation has introduced new requirements for the pre-service preparation of physical education teachers (Chen Yiwen et al., 2018). In line with the Ministry of Education's principle of “using accreditation to drive quality,” each physical education program should advance systematic reforms in areas such as training objectives, curriculum/program design, program planning, and internal quality monitoring, so as to ensure successful compliance and establish mechanisms for sustained improvement.

First, revise the training objectives to align precisely with each university's positioning and needs. Program objectives have a guiding function for approximately five years after graduation. In the past, many institutions set goals that were homogeneous, distorted, or misaligned with their institutional mission. Under accreditation requirements that “any statement must be

evidenced,” objectives must be evidentiary, attainable, and assessable. Institutions should, in light of their application-oriented/ teaching-and-research-oriented/research-oriented positioning, conduct extensive outreach to employers and frontline basic-education schools to formulate differentiated, actionable training objectives with matched graduation requirements (for example, focusing the objectives on preparing PE teachers for rural primary and secondary schools).

Second, use the curriculum system as the lever to optimize the training program. The curriculum is the key carrier for achieving program objectives and graduation requirements. A “course–graduation requirements” mapping matrix should be established to specify the contribution points and sequencing of each course—especially core courses—while coordinating general education, major-required/elective courses, and teacher-education course clusters. The design should both meet accreditation baselines and reflect institutional distinctiveness, using curriculum restructuring to drive overall program optimization.

Third, refine a student-centered cultivation plan. Following an outcomes-based education (OBE) approach, construct competency growth pathways and mechanisms for continuous improvement: at the common level, drive a shift from “teaching” to “learning,” strengthening students’ active learning and transfer of abilities; at the differentiated level, institutions at different tiers should highlight distinctive goals—for example, research universities may focus on cultivating PE education leaders with a global vision.

Fourth, refine internal quality monitoring to form a closed loop of continuous improvement. Accreditation is periodic; passing it is not the endpoint. Programs should, across the eight dimensions—program objectives, graduation requirements, curriculum and instruction, collaboration and practicum, faculty, supporting conditions, quality assurance, and student development—establish a self-evaluation–diagnosis–improvement–feedback mechanism. Using data-based evidence to identify problems promptly and track the effects of interventions will strengthen programs’ capacity for self-development and elevate overall educational quality.

5. Summary

Teacher Education Accreditation in China provides a measurable, verifiable, and improvable institutional pathway for the high-quality development of physical education programs. Its value lies not in “a certificate on paper,” but in using standards-led guidance, evidence-driven decision-making, and peer empowerment to advance the modernization of program governance, high-quality coordination between curriculum and practicum, and a return to the core educational mission. Looking ahead, under a unified framework of national standards, we should build a multi-level quality assurance system and a robust professional community ecosystem, enabling physical education programs to play a more pivotal supporting role in the strategy of strengthening teacher education. In so doing, we can realize a virtuous cycle of “evaluation for construction, evaluation for improvement, the integration of evaluation and construction, with emphasis on building capacity.”

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