

A Multi-Perspective Analysis: Sino-Foreign Joint Higher Education Projects in China as Policy Mediators, Critics, and Constructors

Hantian Wu^{a,*} and Muchu Zhang^b

^a*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada*

^b*Beijing Normal University, China*

*Corresponding author: Email: Hantian.wu@mail.utoronto.ca. Address: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Introduction

This article focuses on the policy-related interactions between the Sino-foreign higher education (HE) in Mainland China, including both joint branch campuses of foreign universities and cooperation programs within Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs), and the government of the Chinese HE system. After 1949, the Chinese government reestablished a highly centralized and structuralized HE system by following the Soviet model. “On the central government level, higher education was under the control of the Ministry of Education (MOE) which was in turn under the supervision of the Cultural and Educational Affairs Committee” (Hu 1961, p. 160). In 1985, the system started a process of decentralization after the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee published its decision to reform education pointing to increasing autonomy of HEIs.¹ During the last decade, many foreign universities started projects in China that have included establishing international branch campuses. Examples of those are New York University Shanghai and the University of Nottingham Ningbo. In a global perspective, as an outcome of HE internationalization and globalization, for instance, through international HE cooperation, projects should “increase local capacity and provide a different type of education” (Lane 2011, p. 367). Therefore, it is quite necessary to focus on policy interactions and policy dialogues between Sino-foreign joint HE projects and policymakers, the major administrators of the HE system in Mainland China.

Conceptual Framework

W. H. Clune (1990) provides the perspective to scrutinize the roles of schools within the policy context as policy mediators, policy critics, and policy constructors, and states that “schools can be sources of alternative policies rather than simply mediators or critics of the policies currently in force” (p. 266). Such perspective of education policy analysis is quite useful to help understand Sino-foreign HEIs in China as active actors rather than passive recipients of policy, since most of the relevant policies were formulated or reformed to fulfill the requirements of the existing joint HE projects and based on their reflections towards the previous regulations. Therefore, it seems more suitable to deal with the policy formulation and implementation processes as dialogues, which are dynamic and interactional, between policy-makers and joint HE projects. Based on the original concepts of Clune’s (1990) policy-school mutual perspective, we discuss the phenomena of Sino-foreign joint HEIs and programs, including both the existing situations and present problems, as the indicators of the relevant policy innovation (as the policy mediator), policy flaws and limitations (as the policy critic), and the possible approaches to policy reform (as the policy constructor). Comparing to Clune’s (1990) original concepts, the roles of the joint HEIs are defined relatively as more passive due to the entire rigid HE administration system in Mainland China.

Policy Mediator

The development of Sino-foreign HE projects can be seen as the outcome of the education policy evolution during the last decades. In other words, the government ultimately promotes a prosperous presence of the Sino-foreign joint HE projects. From 1986 to the present, according to China's Five-Year Plans' key documents and subdocuments about education development strategies formulated by the MOE, it is obvious that the central government carefully considered the internationalization of the Chinese HE system. The policy innovation trend of internationalization can be seen as the direct political root and policy context of the implementation of the Sino-foreign joint HE projects. In 2004, the MOE published its first policy document to regulate Sino-foreign joint institutions.² In 2012, the MOE published a document about strengthening the regulation of the foreign-related schools.³ Also, a plan to regulate and evaluate Sino-foreign joint schools was published in 2014.⁴ It is clear that after a booming period of the education market, the government has adjusted its major policy purposes from simply promoting the development of international joint institutions to considering balancing their development and institutionalization. In 2013, the MOE published two reports, one about the Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools and the other about international education exchanges.⁵ These two reports explain the government's increasing concern about HE internationalization and cooperation.

An outcome of the central government's internationalization-oriented education policy innovation, according to data published by the MOE in 2014, the total number of Sino-foreign joint HE-level projects was 1,979, including 930 projects authorized by the MOE and 1,049 projects approved by provincial governments. Enrollment in HE-level joint projects was over 450,000 in 2014, which is about 1.4 percent of the total number of Sino-foreign HE-level fulltime students. In short, the development of the Sino-foreign joint HE projects clearly shows the effectiveness of relevant policy reform. The joint HEIs and cooperation programs can be seen as the mediators of the internationalization-oriented HE policy transformation.

Policy Critic

Even though being highly effective about promoting the development of Sino-foreign joint HE projects, the current policy system has flaws or limitations that have already caused several problems. They can be somehow inferred from the following issues.

First, the numbers of projects, degree levels, and majors are limited. In present China, although the total number of international cooperation HE projects is increasing rapidly, its proportion is small when compared to the entire Chinese HE system. As Genshu Lu, Hui Kang, and Ni Yan (2013) state, most of the international branch campuses and cooperation programs provide undergraduate-level courses (75.2 percent) and some of them master-level programs (22.6 percent). Only 0.9 percent of them offer doctoral-level courses and programs. According to Jia and Chen (2005), most of the degree programs offered by the Sino-foreign joint HEIs and programs are in economics/business-related majors (46 percent, including finance, marketing, and management), applied foreign language skills (19 percent), and applied electronic engineering (13 percent, including computer science).

Second, there is an unbalanced distribution of Sino-foreign joint HE projects in China. Data from 2013 show that most of the international cooperation HE programs and branch campuses are in Eastern China, the relatively more developed region (over 55 percent), while only five percent are in the 12 western provinces.

Third, there is a lack of institutional autonomy. In China, "unlike some other countries that allow foreign universities to have a free hand in setting up and running an educational enterprise, China's Ministry of Education has developed a set of rules and regulations on the presence and operation of foreign higher educational institutions in China" (Feng 2013, p. 473). Under the current policies, "no foreign university can set up a program, let alone, a campus, without partnering with a Chinese institution and the head of the offspring institution must be a Chinese citizen" (Feng 2012, p. 473). The lack of institutional autonomy exists not only in the joint HE projects, but also in the Chinese partner HEIs, since the HE system in China is highly centralized and controlled by

the central government. It is obvious that “the degree of institutional autonomy in relation to the state will have a significant impact on the institution’s attitude towards internationalization issues” (Wilkins and Huisman 2012, p. 632).

Finally, the regulation and evaluation system is incomplete. By supporting the creation of international joint HE projects, it could be expected that the direct and core benefits for the host country would be high quality HE resources and advanced administrative models from the source countries. In China, there are a few policies to evaluate the quality of education and/or to standardize the management of such joint HEIs and programs. Currently, there are seven major relevant regulations to monitor and measure teaching quality that are deemed inadequate (Chen 2013).⁶

In short, as policy critic, the existing problems of the Sino-foreign joint HE projects show that although they have rapidly increased during the past decade, government policy intervention to support the development of Sino-foreign HE projects is still limited and has flaws. The current policy system needs to be further improved.

Policy Constructor

As a new HE model in China, Sino-foreign joint HE projects represent an alternative to domestic universities or study abroad for Chinese students (Wang and Feng 2013). As mentioned before, the total enrollment of the existing joint HEIs and programs is growing fast since the current education market for such joint HE projects is a typical seller's market, which means that the demand is much greater than the supply. Within the present Chinese HE system, Sino-foreign joint HE projects provide a feasible approach to establishing more accessible and flexible HE administrative methods and providing different HE learning experiences to students. Even though the present issues can be seen as the outcome of policy innovation and government promotion, in spite of the uncontrollability and uncertainty of education policy implementation, it is still necessary for the Sino-foreign joint HE projects, especially joint HEIs, to try to become active actors in the policymaking process, rather than being passive recipients of the existing policy system.

However, current joint institutions can hardly play the role as policy constructors directly and effectively due to the highly centralized bureaucratic system in China. As well as HEIs and/or programs located in Mainland China, Western university counterparts have to adjust their previous methods of communicating with the government while facing Chinese realities. It is also necessary for the Chinese government to make the policymaking process more inclusive; otherwise, there will not be enough interaction between policymakers and institutions, which may eventually limit the policy implementation process (Hall 1993).

Furthermore, administrators of joint institutions may be able to play an active role in policymaking because of their special triple identities: administrators of Sino-foreign joint HE projects, administrators of Chinese partner universities, and government officials in the field of HE. Under the existing policy, since the head of a Sino-foreign joint project has to be a Chinese citizen (Feng 2012), administrators of joint projects are usually the administrators of the Chinese partner universities. In addition, since administrators of Chinese public universities are part of the bureaucratic system, they may be able to impact the MOE’s policymaking process as “insiders.” Therefore, they can be seen as potential actors who might be able to participate in policymaking due to their triple identities.

In addition, Sino-foreign joint projects may become an important factor in the process of educating or training future policymakers who might further promote the decentralization of the Chinese HE system. Different from the domestic public Chinese universities, the education philosophies of Sino-foreign joint HE projects tend to have more liberal classroom structures and are usually more student-centered. Furthermore, the student-professor relationship may also be quite different. Other than being trained to become obedient, at least partly guided by Western HE philosophies, students are usually encouraged to communicate with the instructors equally. Such flexible and decentralized HE experiences may create consciousness to further promoting decentralization, not only of HE policies but also of other political and socioeconomic policy areas.

Conclusion

As a very important component of the Chinese HE system and an effective factor to promote HE internationalization, Sino-foreign joint HE projects should be both fully supported and modestly regulated by the government. Based on the previous discussion through three perspectives, it seems clear that the Chinese government, its policymakers, is now facing the dilemma of either sacrificing the institutional autonomy of Sino-foreign joint HE projects to strengthen the government control over the HE system or allowing more institutional autonomy and policy flexibility to stimulate the development of joint project. In short, a question for policymakers is if there are any possible approaches to provide Sino-foreign joint HE projects with some level of administrative autonomy without risking to decreasing education quality and reputation (Zha 2012).

Evidently, after over a decade of development, the present administrative policy system that regulates the Sino-foreign joint HE projects is still developing and has room for further improvement (Yang 2014). Indeed, the major question is how the Chinese government should build a policy system and a policymaking process to use the subjective initiative of the joint HE projects to optimize the current Chinese HE system. In other words, supporting establishing international joint HE projects is not only a process of importing high quality education resources but also a process of learning from the Western educational, administrative, and policy formulation philosophies. In summary, the Sino-foreign joint HEIs and programs should not be treated and should not treat themselves as passive policy recipients but as active actors in the existing policy context. China may take great advantage from developing its soft power in the predictable future (Mok et al. 2014) through modifying its HE internationalization-related policies.

Notes

1. CPC Central Committee's Decision on Education Reform [中共中央关于教育体制改革的决定]
2. Implementation Measures of the Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools [中华人民共和国中外合作办学条例实施办法]
3. MOE Announcement of Strengthening the Management of the Foreign-Related Schools [教育部办公厅关于加强涉外办学规范管理的通知]
4. Assessment Programme of Sino-foreign Cooperation Institutions [中外合作办学评估方案]
5. Report of the Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools after the Education Plan implemented in the Past Three Years [教育规划纲要实施三年来中外合作办学发展情况] and The Report of the Education Cooperation and Exchanges Progress [教育对外合作与交流进展情况]
6. The 7 documents are mainly based on the People's Republic of China Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools Regulations [中华人民共和国中外合作办学条例]

References

- Chen, Li-cui. 2013. "Thoughts on Quality Evaluation Policy Evolution of Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools [中外合作办学质量评估的政策演进与思考]." *Education and Teaching Research [教育与教学研究]* 27(7): 93-96.
- Clune, W. H. 1990. "Three Views of Curriculum Policy in the School Context: the School as Policy Mediator, Policy Critic, and Policy Constructor." In *The Contexts of Teaching in Secondary Schools. Teachers' Realities*, edited by Milbrey W. McLaughlin, Joan E. Talbert, and Nina Bascia, (pp. 256-270). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Feng, Yi. 2013. "University of Nottingham Ningbo China and Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University: Globalization of Higher Education in China." *Higher Education* 65(4): 471-485.
- Hall, Peter A. 1993. "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain." *Comparative Politics* 25(3): 275-297.

- Hu, Chang-Tu. 1961. "Higher Education in Mainland China." *Comparative Education Review* 4(3): 159-168.
- Jia, Bo, and Chen, Jing-pu. 2005. "Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools: Currency and Tendency [中外合作办学现状及存在的问题]." *Journal of Yanshan University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)* [燕山大学学报:哲学社会科学版] 6(2): 38-41
- Lane, Jason E. 2011. "Importing Private Higher Education: International Branch Campuses." *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, 13(4): 367-381.
- Lu, Genshu, Hui Kang, and Ni Yan. 2013. "On the Current Situation, Problems and Development Countermeasures of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education [中外合作办学: 现状, 问题与发展对策]." *Research in Higher Education of Engineering* [高等工程教育研究] (4): 75-80.
- Mok, Ka Ho, Yu Cheung Wong, and Yu Guo. 2011. "Transforming from Economic Power to Soft Power: Challenges for Managing Education for Migrant Workers' Children and Human Capital in Chinese Cities." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 31(3): 325-344.
- Wang, Q., and Feng, Y. March 27, 2013. "'Not Going Abroad Overseas Studies' Promote the Internationalization of Higher Education in China [‘不出国的留学’撬动高校国际化]." *The Guangming Daily* [光明日报]: 16.
- Wilkins, Stephen, and Jeroen Huisman. 2012. "The International Branch Campus as Transnational Strategy in Higher Education." *Higher Education* 64(5): 627-645.
- Yang, Rui. 2014. "China's Strategy for the Internationalization of Higher Education: An Overview." *Frontiers of Education in China* 9(2): 151-162.
- Zha, Qiang. 2012. "Transnational Higher Education in China: Towards a Critical Culturalist Research Agenda." In *Education and Global Cultural Dialogue: A Tribute to Ruth Hayhoe*, edited by Karen Mundy and Qiang Zha, (pp. 107-123). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.