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Evaluation of Higher Education Programmes: Case studies from China

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Background

Many aspects of education, including the role of the state to policy decision-making and implementation, have been reshaped and re-oriented as part of global trends. With the resurgence of neo-liberalism in governmental management, decentralization and marketization of higher education have emerged as global response strategies

The rapid increase in student enrollment in higher education is a consequence of the transition from elite education to mass education. In this context maintaining and improving the quality of tertiary institutions has become a key issue. Besides, the capacity of tertiary institutes for cultivating well qualified graduates universities has been challenged by many employers (Harvey & Knight, 1996). In seeking to respond to the pressures of globalization and the demands of different stakeholders, many countries have established quality assurance mechanisms in higher education.

Compared with some "pioneering countries", such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, conducting quality assurance in China has been relatively recent. In China, before initiating the Evaluation of University Bacculaureate Programs (EUBP) in higher education in 2002, some evaluation-related work had been completed, for example: the Chinese government started an evaluation of engineering as a trial in 1985. This was followed by the 'draft regulation of higher education institution evaluation' in 1990. After 1994, China started three evaluation programs: 'University Evaluation Standards Project'; 'Exemplary evaluation'; and 'Random Evaluation' (Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education, 2004). In 2002, China integrated these three types of evaluation and initiated the 'Evaluation of University Bacculaureate Programs Project' that was considered to be a landmark in quality assurance in Chinese higher education. Between 2002 and 2008, 609 institutes had undergone this evaluation.

Research Questions

Many Asian governments, including China, continue to play an influential role in shaping local education policy decision making and development orientation (Mok, 2003). Ngok and Chan (2003) have argued that the Chinese government has never retreated from undertaking education reform. Although, over the last two decades, there has been decentralization in fiscal support and management of higher education institutions, the re-centralization of management, both at the state level and the university levels, has been strengthened by quality assurance conducted by the Chinese government. Centralization and decentralization have coexisted in China's higher education (Hawkins, 2000).

Recent comparative educational policy studies have demonstrated that, even where there are similar arrangements for the organization of higher education, organizational reforms vary according to political and economic contexts (Honig, 2009; Mok & Lo, 2002). Our study explores various methods of quality assurance adopted in higher education institutions in China. It also highlights the coexisting phenomenon (centralization and decentralization) and implications for evaluation systems implementation in China. The two main research questions are:

(a) To what extent have decentralization and centralization influenced EUBP in China?

(b) What are the impacts of EUBP on institutions and individuals (university teachers) in the case of selected higher education institutions in Jiangsu province?

Methods

We have utilized two qualitative research methods: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The data were collected from four different types of universities in Jiangsu province, a developed littoral province in the central part of the Chinese mainland. Partly because of its location and traditional culture, Jiangsu province ranks highly nationally both in economy and education. For our study we selected for strongly contrasted universities.

The first one is a key comprehensive university under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education. As one of the top universities in China, it provides advanced teaching and research facilities. There are currently 40,000 students. The second university is a key comprehensive provincial university which also has a long cultural history and with a total enrollment of more than 30,000 students. The third one is a specialized institute that began offering undergraduate programs in the early 1990s and has developed rapidly in recent years. The last one is a new institute of technology which has a shorter history. Both of the latter institutions have fewer than 20,000 students.

Formal research interviews were conducted with staff members (including school-level administrators, department-level administrators, and frontline teachers) in these four universities. The interviewees were employed in various departments representing a wide range of responsibilities and involvement in the EUBP.

Frame

Quality assurance is not a new idea in higher education. It has developed different deep meanings and mechanisms over time. Quality assurance systems in many countries have well-developed systematic and far reaching approaches to ensure that universities have efficient mechanisms for assessment and improvement (Harman, 1998). Generally, these have internal and external arrangements. Harman has summarized the external review systems in many countries, concluding that they have the following core dimensions of management: a responsible agency/unit (national or system level and institutional level), participation in reviews and other activities, methodologies of review and assessment, focus (national or system level and institutional level), purposes, and reporting and follow-up activities. In addition, Bray (1999) suggested that there were three major types of decentralization of policy making and implementation:

- Deconcentration: the transfer of tasks and work, but not authority, to sub-units and organizations;
- Delegation: the transfer of decision making authority from a higher unit to lower ones, but the authority can be withdrawn at the discretion of delegating unit;
- Devolution: refers to the transfer of authority to an autonomous unit which can act independently without permission from the delegating unit.

Building on these two theoretical bases, initially, we highlight the context of EUBO as well as the operational realities and coexisting phenomena of the complex implementation system of EUBP in China. We go on to explore both the perceived positive and negative impacts of the EUBP on institutions and university teachers.

Research findings

Bray (1999) argued that the policy and governing model must be analyzed in the context of politics, history, value systems and other interaction factors such as linguistic plurality, geographic location and style of communications. The more understanding of variation and complex interaction factors in implementation, the better capacity of programs participants to produce desired results (O'Day, 2002).

China, with a centralized education system, has implemented the policy of EUBP cautiously. The central government has kept a close watch on all of the quality assurance procedures. This has meant that the EUBP in China has distinctive centralization characteristics, such as the unified

specific indices of assessment, and the constitution of an assessment agency. Such characteristics have had some positive impacts on many universities, including: increasing investment in constructing facilities, providing necessary equipment or improving the campus environment; and reexamining the development orientation of the universities and the management of instruction. However, the EUBP causes cultural tensions between standardized external review and internal academic autonomy in the institutions, inducing pressure on, and negative emotional responses of, administrators and teachers.

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