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How do academics perceive the incentives for Humanities and Social Sciences international publications: A case study of a top Chinese university (0365)

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I. Introduction

Since the number and subsequent citations of international publications have been used as essential factors to determine global university rankings (Hazelkorn, 2015), publication in international journals is encouraged by governments and higher education institutions in their pursuit of becoming “world-class universities” (Chou, 2014; Shin, 2007). Incentivising international publications has prevailed in Chinese universities as one of the major approaches to internationalising university research (Huang, 2015; Yuan, 2011). Since the early 2000s, an increasing number of Chinese universities began publishing incentives for Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) international publications (Dang, 2005; Zhu, 2009).

Incentives for HSS international publications included both monetary bonuses and career-related regulations. Universities offered HSS academics much larger financial bonuses for SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index) and A&HCI (Arts and Humanities Citation Index) publications than for most domestic publications (e.g. Zhejiang University, 2009). Moreover, SSCI and A&HCI papers were granted higher ranks and considerable weight in research evaluations (e.g. Minzu University of China, 2010). The prestige of international publications, especially SSCI and A&HCI publications, was made clear in those incentive schemes.

This phenomenon has provoked heated debates. The central government and some scholars believed the encouragement of international publications will enhance the global impact of Chinese HSS (e.g. Ren & Lu, 2003; Wang, 2010). However, other government sources and some scholars were concerned that the over-emphasis on international publications may cause negative consequences, such as ‘worshipping’ the SSCI and A&HCI publications (Li & Lyu, 2015, p. 173).

A review of the literature revealed that research assessment and incentives based on publications in certain international journals are under discussion in various countries (e.g. Franzoni, Scellato, & Stephan, 2011; Lee & Lee, 2013). However,

current debates largely centred on the unequal status of central and peripheral countries (e.g. Altbach, 2009; Canagarajah, 1996; Hanafi, 2011), the hegemony of the English language in internationalization (e.g. Ammon, 2010; Flowerdew, 1999), the problems and impact of metrics-based evaluations of HSS research (e.g. De Rijcke, Wouters, Rushforth, Franssen, & Hammarfelt, 2016; Wilsdon et al., 2015), and the managerial culture behind the use of incentives for publications (e.g. Olssen & Peters, 2007; Waitere, Wright, Tremaine, Brown, & Pausé, 2011). In the Chinese context, current discussions remained mainly at the national and institutional levels, examining how such incentives have influenced the development of Chinese HSS research or institutional research performance (e.g. Dang, 2005; Qin & Zhang, 2008).

As international publications are becoming central to individual scholars' progress in their academic career (Hyland, 2009; Swan, 2001), individual academics' perspective is a topic worth exploring yet still lacking in the literature on incentives in the Chinese context. Therefore, this research intends to explore the incentive schemes from the perspectives of academics, and investigate HSS academics' perceptions of both the monetary and career-related incentives for international publications.

II Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate academics' perceptions of incentives for international publications at a top Chinese university. The case university was chosen based on three criteria: (1) its research productivity, as demonstrated by its larger number of SSCI publications than most other Chinese universities, (2) its agenda of internationalisation, as revealed by the university's strategic plan to 'build a world-class university' over the past decades, and (3) its incentives for HSS international publications, as the university and departments had implemented both monetary and career-related incentives for around ten years. At the university level, academics would be awarded ¥6,000 (approximately £695) for each SSCI or A&HCI paper. Most HSS departments also provided additional bonuses for each SSCI or A&HCI publication, ranging from a few hundred Chinese Yuan to ¥80,000 (approximately £9,269). In research evaluation, such as tenure promotion and annual assessment, some departments also demanded a certain number of international publications.

Academics interviewed were from five HSS departments of the case university, and were wide-spread in terms of their disciplines, education

backgrounds, overseas research experiences, international publishing experiences, academic titles, career stages, and administrative positions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting from half an hour to three hours, and were recorded with interviewees' consent. In addition to interviews, this research also drew on policy documents and publication data collected from the university and departments.

III Findings

Academics reported divergent attitudes towards monetary and career-related incentives: while none of them held unfavourable stances to monetary incentives, they expressed conflicting attitudes towards career-related incentives.

Academics interviewed articulated either a favourable or neutral stance to monetary incentives for HSS international publications. Firstly, they argued that monetary bonuses could act as a compensation for academics' efforts, since all interviewees stated that due to the longer review process and difficulties in academic English writings, publishing internationally required academics to contribute an extra amount of time and efforts. Secondly, it was a consensus among interviewees that monetary bonuses could be a signal released by institutions to encourage the internationalisation of HSS research, hence were of high importance in institutional policies.

As for career-related incentives, academics held various attitudes towards the importance of international publications in research evaluation. Their attitudes can be broadly categorised into three types, which spreads across a continuum, starting with the viewpoint that international publications should be the vital or even the only indicator in research evaluation, to the attitude that international publications should be essential but not of the highest importance, and to the stance that international publications should be an optional indicator in research evaluation.

Academics' different attitudes towards career-related incentives were grounded on their conflicting perceptions of four major issues: language problems, the quality and value of international publications, the diversity in assessing HSS research, and the tension between the internationalisation and localisation of HSS.

IV Conclusions and implications

This research investigated the incentives for HSS international publications

from the perspectives of HSS academics from a top Chinese university. It revealed that although academics from the case university did not express unfavourable attitudes towards monetary incentives, they demonstrated different attitudes towards career-related incentives. Based on academics' perceptions of various issues relating to the incentives, this research generated policy implications on the use of international publications, the assessment of HSS research, and the approaches to the internationalisation of HSS.

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