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A Comparative Study of Institutional Dynamics of Universities in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan

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Research Domain: Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract: This presentation reports the preliminary findings of the qualitative part of a study that examines the complexity of the relationship between governance matters and the institutional and cultural settings in the higher education systems of three Chinese societies – Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. This qualitative research sought to explain the coordination mechanism in university governance through an analysis of data generated from 53 interviews. Evidences collected from the interviews were used to reveal the interactions and relationships amongst the various actors on governance matters and to construct a taxonomy of institutional balance of power in the higher education systems of three Chinese societies. The presentation will conclude with future research directions, which take account of cultural issues and their connection with institutional arrangements, thereby illustrating the complex relationships between institutional forms and cultural features of higher education governance in the three societies.

Paper: This presentation reports the preliminary findings of the qualitative part of a study that examines the complexity of the relationship between governance matters and the institutional and cultural settings in the higher education systems of three Chinese societies – Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

Conceptual Framework

The literature reveals that contemporary university governance is characterised by various forms of interaction, intervention and control, which require an engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders (e.g. Shattock, 2002; Taylor, 2013), and that there are different possibilities to achieve an institutional balance of power in higher education systems. Specifically, in state-centred systems, the state directly coordinates all or most aspects of higher education. Some systems consider universities as self-governing communities of scholars where academic self-governance is adopted to be its guiding organisational principle. Some systems adopt the market-oriented approach, emphasising

that universities operate as businesses within and for local and global markets, and stipulates that their organisational principles are characterised by entrepreneurialism (Dobbins et al., 2011).

These classifications of university governance demonstrate the fusion of internal and external actors and forces and highlight the importance of coordination among these players in contemporary university governance. They offer an institutional dimension of university governance. However, several studies have found that the norms of coordination may vary across different cultural and political contexts (e.g. Clark, 1983; Olsen, 2007). The cultural and political factors justify the changing locations of national systems in the analytical frameworks for the cross-country comparison of university governance. Thus, a cultural dimension of university governance helps evaluate the relevance of governance models to individual university national systems and understand the complexity of their interrelationships; and, the notion of hybridisation is particularly useful to understand university governance in Asia.

Researchers have found that contemporary Asian universities are deeply influenced by their Western counterparts and thus are products of hybridisation (e.g. Hayhoe, 1989; Altbach, 2001). On this basis, Hawkins et al. (2013) argue that evaluating 'Asian elements' in higher education development can help characterise the cultural hybridity of Asian higher education. Four hybrid elements identified by Hawkins et al. are particularly useful in addressing the issues of coordination among stakeholders in university governance. First, attitude towards hierarchy highlights the significance of hierarchy in the organisational structure of universities. Second, commitment to meritocracy highlights the significance of relational approaches in university governance. Third, acceptance of academic freedom refers to notions of freedom of expression. In Confucian traditions, the notion of 'intellectual freedom' co-exists with the close relationships between scholars and the state. By contrast, 'academic freedom' in the Western context emphasises the separation between the state and academia and highlights the importance of protecting the freedom of expression of scholars. Last, understanding of the role of universities in democratisation stipulates that Asian universities are expected to act as stabilising forces in the society, but such an expectation does not apply in the West.

The notion of hybridisation is based on the assumption that Asian higher education is a product of competition between Eastern and Western cultural elements and their appearance in the conception of higher education. Such a conceptual assumption is effective in demonstrating the influence of cultural roots on coordination among various internal and external actors and forces in university governance in the three Chinese societies.

Methods

This 30-month research is divided into four phases, using a multi-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This presentation covers the first two phases of the research, which constitutes the qualitative part of the study.

Phase 1 consists of documentary analysis, which addresses major internal and external governing actors in the higher education systems of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. The documentary research identifies the key system-level governing bodies in the three societies. It also reveals the similarities

and differences between governance structures of universities in the three systems.

Phase 2 comprises 53 semi-structured interviews conducted between April 2018 and June 2019. Using purposive sampling, the research includes respondents from system-level governing bodies (e.g. government officials, lawmakers and members of relevant statutory agencies) and university-level governing bodies (e.g. senior management and council members). This phase of the research looks into the mechanisms of coordination among the internal and external actors and the relationship between the coordination mechanisms and the institutional balance of power in higher education systems. It also includes a set of open-ended descriptions of governance matters in which hybrid elements emerge, and seeks evidence that cultural hybridity explained and characterised the behaviours performed in the governance matters.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary analysis of the interview data suggests the relevance of the three identified coordination approaches (i.e. state-centred approach, market-oriented approach and academic self-governance) to understanding the coordination mechanisms and institutional balance of power in the three higher education systems. The open-ended descriptions of governance matters also indicate the significance of the hybrid elements (e.g. attitude towards hierarchy and understanding the role of universities in democratisation). For example, the interview data collected from Taiwan reveals that while the state directly participates in many governance matters of universities, students are actively involved in university governance due to political democratisation. In Macau, the interview data suggests that students are rather inactive in participating in university governance, given the conservative atmosphere on campus. Meanwhile, the relationship between university and government is ambiguous, as the regulatory framework for universities is undeveloped. In Hong Kong, students' participation in university governance is restricted, though universities are considered to be autonomous in the higher education system. These findings illustrate the complexity of the mechanisms of coordination and suggests the significance of the three coordination approaches and the two named hybrid elements in analysing the institutional balance of power and the cultural hybridity in the three higher education systems.

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