

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Policy Experimentation in China's Higher Education Reforms and Policymaking

Shuangmiao Han¹

¹*Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China*

Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: China has adopted policy experimentation (PE) as a means of introducing and testing innovative policy options for reforms in higher education (HE). The paper proposes a theoretical categorisation to understand four types of PE that occurred in China's HE sector, i.e. directive, authorised, exploratory and retrospectively-authorised experiments. Using four empirically-informed case studies with extensive documentary evidence and 40 elite interviews, it argues that the PE approach enables state-university interactions and power negotiations that create and maintain strategy space for consensus-building in the policy-making process. The state, however, retains ultimate authority for legitimatising, selecting and expanding policy experiments. It is best understood as 'elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies'. This study provides a distinctive perspective for understanding and explaining the power dynamics embedded in China's HE reform and policymaking process, and more broadly the evolution of higher education governance.

Paper: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS[\[1\]](#)

China's Higher education (HE) has achieved major breakthroughs through continuous reform efforts since the Reform and Opening-up. Local experiments are often the first stage in planned social change, and 'the hallmark of how China has undertaken all sorts of reforms' since the late 1970s (Florini et al. 2012, p. 4). 'Policy experimentation' (PE) is defined as the process of generating and testing innovative policy options, often by local leadership cadres or by state authorities. These can then be replicated on a larger scale and even incorporated into nationwide policies (Heilmann 2008)—this type of 'extensive, continuous and loosely institutionalised experimentation' is regarded as a 'crucial policy mechanism' in China (4).

PE did not start in higher education, but it has constituted an important force in shaping higher education reforms in Contemporary China. Despite growing scholarly discussion on China's experimental governance, there is little discussion on how PE is able to initiate, sustain and expand institutional reforms. Therefore, this study seeks to unpack how different types of PE facilitates and mediates state-university interaction and negotiation in the experimenting process, and investigate

how different actors' ideas and behaviors shape the outcome of policy experiments, thus allowing those locally generated policy options become viable in a politically charged policymaking environment.

METHODOLOGY

The study is supported by a collection of four case studies informed by extensive document analysis and in-depth elite interviews. The adoption of a case study paradigm could provide an analytical perspective to investigate the intricacies and peculiarities of a particularly complicated topic as PE. Documentary evidence includes primary documents such as policy papers, leaders' speeches and memories, and secondary documents such as scholarly work and media reports. Targeted interviewees include both state stakeholders such as officials and civil servants, and university actors such as presidents and departmental directors. 40 of them were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling and anonymised in the study for ethical considerations. Together, they allowed the researcher to understand those being studied from their perspectives while maintaining a broader view of China's HE reforms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A theoretical categorisation of policy experiments

The study identifies two key factors that mark the differences among policy experiments, i.e., manner of initiation and level of involvement of the state. It therefore theoretically categorises the different modes for conducting policy experiments as part of the HE policymaking process, as shown in Figure 1.

The 'directive experiment' refers to an experiment that is primarily sponsored by the state with its frequent intervention during the implementation phase carried out by the university. An 'authorised experiment' can also be initiated by state actors, who delegate the power to the university to carry out the experimental project. The university then works out the design and tests the innovative policy options that may be replicated on a larger scale with ample strategy space. A 'retrospectively-authorized experiment' refers to an experiment that is promoted and driven by a university, usually with informal state recognition and support. The government gives retrospective recognition and authorisation. An 'exploratory experiment' refers to an experiment that is proactively initiated by a university based on its vision for reform without a clear route to the policy process. The state might take a distant, opposing or acquiescent stance. Hence, the openness of the strategy space needs to be negotiated.

Elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies

The study documents different rationales used for implementing policy experiments. State actors use PE to exert pressure on universities to introduce reforms, to lower associated risks and to strengthen the nation's overall HE policymaking capacity in a volatile and extremely heterogeneous context. For their part, university leaders have adopted PE locally to navigate China's administrative heavy environment and to negotiate with state actors more favourable terms for reforms. Therefore, the PE approach enables state-university interactions and power negotiations that create and maintain strategy space for consensus-building and institutional changes. It is an iterative process characterised by central-local interaction and intentionally ambiguous boundaries. The state,

however, retains ultimate authority for legitimatising, selecting and expanding policy experiments. The paper proposed that the process is best understood as 'elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies'.

Taking the long view, China's 40-year effort (since 1978) to develop a modern HE system has struggled to achieve a balance between state power and institutional autonomy. This study therefore provides a distinctive perspective for understanding and explaining the power dynamics embedded in China's HE reform and policymaking process, the state and university relationship, and more broadly the evolution of China's HE governance.

[1] * The submission is a condensed version of a published paper. See Han, S. (2020). Policy experimentation and power negotiation in China's higher education reforms. *Higher Education*, 79, 243-257.

References:

Figures

Figure 1.

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-019-00407-2/figures/1>

Key references

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