Minorities and elites in global higher education: Complexities, contradictions and the Minzu Universities of China (0371)

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Abstract

The national and international landscapes of global higher education are complex, changing and fraught with contradictions. This paper focuses on the example of the Minzu Universities, a system of higher education institutions provided particularly for ethnic minorities in China (Qumu, 2006), as a means of exploring changing equalities and inequalities inherent in global higher education. The Minzu universities are a complex mix of providing opportunities for social mobility for the minority communities and maintaining the status quo (Li and Liu, 2011). The issue of minorities and elites in the context of Minzu Universities is explored in parallel with factors such as the global rankings which are driving and accentuating inequalities in global higher education (Marginson 2015). The paper draws on an in-depth empirical case study of three Chinese Minzu Universities (one being locally regulated), and contextualises this data against research relating to internationalisation in higher education.

Outline

In order to understand the ebbs and flows of advantage and disadvantage in global higher education it is illuminating to focus on China as an example and more specifically on the case of the Minzu Universities of China. This paper draws on an in-depth empirical case study of three Chinese Minzu Universities (one being locally regulated), and contextualises this data against research relating to internationalisation in higher education.

China has been expanding and reforming its higher education system over the last decades and with the rapid development of the Chinese economy since 1978 and universities in China have become key agents in economic and social development (Willis 2006; Hou, Montgomery and McDowell, 2014). The Chinese 211 project was initiated in 1995 and to 2011 a group of 112 universities were supported by the 211 project, receiving extensive funding to 'groom talents and develop disciplines in face of the challenges in 21st century' (Ministry of Education, China, 2013). During the first phase of the project approximately US$ 2.2 billion was invested in the development of this relatively small group of universities. Alongside project 211, the 985 project was initiated in 1999. A small group of 39 universities were selected for intensive funding, aiming to support internationalisation agendas and develop these universities as elites to reach 'world-class' level (ibid). However, despite these initiatives established by China in order to develop 'world-class' universities in mainland China, Minzu universities are mostly invisible in the league table of elite universities.

The ranking statistics indicate that access to the most elite institutions in China is limited for ethnic minority groups . The two most prestigious university (Tsinghua University and Peking university) admitted only 6.9% of ethnic undergraduate representation and 5.9% of graduates are from ethnic groups, compared to the majority Han students (Zhu, 2010). This is akin to the admission of ethnic minorities to 'Oxbridge' in UK context (RFO, 2010). Apart from a geographical analysis which shows that the elite institutions are concentrated in the urban areas (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2015), amongst the total of 15 Minzu Universities, there is only one Minzu University which is included in the

'211' and '985' project and this is the Minzu University of China (centrally located in Beijing). The rest of the Minzu Universities are located in more remote and socio-economically disadvantaged rural regions and locally supported, but not funded as elite institutions. The differentiation in partnerships and networks of the 15 Minzu Universities paint a similar picture of unequal access to elite higher education. The Minzu University of China has large numbers of collaborative links with prestigious universities around the world. In contrast, the international links of Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities (IMUN) are far fewer (only 5 in total) and their list includes less prestigious partners who are not recognised by the global rankings (Yearbook of IMUN, 2013).

One of the major recent influences in HE is the development and growth in global rankings. Whilst rankings of sorts have been around for decades, an intensification of the influence of global rankings began in 2003 with the appearance of Shanghai Jiatong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities (which was based predominantly on research performance). This coincided with a wave of modernisation, marketisation and reform of higher education across many national contexts which began an interaction between the rankings and marketisation (Locke, 2014). The rankings and the intensification of global competition '…*have sparked a world-wide conversation about the role, value and contribution of higher education'* (Hazelkorn, 2014: 12) and the significance of the rankings has gone well beyond being a tool to support student or family choice of university, being now entwined with political and economic positioning by nations in the context of globalisation (Locke, 2014). The increasing importance of competition, the 'market' and the global rankings are supporting the continuance of status and therefore maintaining and accentuating an unequal social order:

'Because university rankings order the status of institutions, they regulate the relative value of graduate credentials. They affect the social position of many people. They have become an integral part of status culture' (Marginson, 2014: 45).

However, the picture is far from being clear and consistent. Against the backdrop of the increase in competition, the dominance of the 'west' is to a certain extent being challenged by the rise of East Asia's universities and the idea that 'the East is rising' (Levin, 2010) is making its way into policy and educational discourse. East Asian countries aim to build 'world class' universities to compete with the best in US and Europe. Both China and Korea have the resources to achieve this and there is a 'developmental dynamism' which is being watched by the USA and Europe with excitement and apprehension (Marginson, 2011: 587). The 100 'Under 50' Times Higher Education Global Ranking shows that the Asia-Pacific region are outperforming the previously dominant Western 'powerhouses' of North America and Europe. The 'young' East outperforms the West across four of the five categories: better in teaching; better in knowledge transfer (income from industry); better in international outlook and research. These young Asian universities only lag behind in published citations, which are in English and thus not a level playing field (Times Higher Education, 2015; Thomson Reuters). Roles and positions are shifting in global higher education, with the strong strategies espoused by China having an impact on Hong Kong which is not the nexus or hub it once was (Montgomery, 2014; Lewis and Montgomery 2015).

Global rankings are heavily driven by the outcomes of research and this disadvantages Minzu universities in terms of their particular mission and characteristics. The paradox of 'equality' and 'inequality' is also reflected in a multifaceted complexity played out in government preferential policies on Minzu universities (Zhao, 2010), influenced by socio-cultural and historical and geographical factors. This discussion of the Minzu Universities of China illustrates a wider point regarding the complexity of the way in which equalities and inequalities are being played out in global higher education.

References

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