

**T8** Conwy 1 Friday 7 December 10.30 - 11.00

***Would ‘First-class Discipline’ Initiative Boost Disciplinary Diversity in Chinese Universities? An Exploratory Study with Four Cases (0278)***

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## **Introduction**

In August 2015, China’s Central Party Committee and the State Council proposed a ‘Double First-class’ (*Shuang Yi Liu*) initiative to build world-class universities and disciplines (*Guo Fa*, 2015). It signalled China’s ambition to promote a selected group of research universities and disciplines to enter the world’s front ranks. The complete list, comprised of 42 ‘first-class university’ and 95 ‘first-class discipline university’ covering 459 first-class disciplines, was released on September 2017.

Compare to Project 985 and Project 211, the country’s two notable excellence classification projects in the past, this new initiative essentially is another way of higher education (HE) classification – those identified universities and disciplines would receive not only higher status but also more resources, particularly direct government funding<sup>1</sup>. A significant change, however, is its focus on ‘discipline’ (academic unit) along with a focus on institutional level. This may greatly impact China’s disciplinary and institutional structure as universities, especially those ‘less-elite’ ones, may be inclined to strategically allocate their resources to build ‘flagship’ disciplines in order to compete for more policy favours and government funding.

Therefore, this study investigates the impact of China’s new initiative since its initial announcement in 2015. In particular, it focuses on those selected as ‘first-class discipline’ universities to understand how this national strategy influence the disciplinary structures of those ‘less-elite’ universities as they respond to changing policy environment and social context while also

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<sup>1</sup> A cross-reference with the ‘double first-class universities’ with the original Project 985 and Project 211 universities shows that all project 985 universities (39 in total) are included in the list of first-class university, and most Project 211 universities are included in the list of first-class discipline university while only 25 non-985 and non-211 universities entered the list of first-class discipline university.

influenced by entrenched disciplinary culture.

### **Theoretical and methodological considerations**

Understanding the behaviours of higher education institutions (HEIs) is a persistent topic in the HE research. Resource dependency theory proposes that organizations rely on external resources to survive and therefore their behaviours are shaped by the available external resources and the constraints from the often-uncontrolled environment (Pfeffer & Slancik, 2003).

In the HE context, the organizational strategy is key for the university to adapt to the external environment or alter the environmental settings to fit the institutional capabilities. It is particularly evident in the Chinese context due to its political arrangement and HE history. China's HEIs heavily rely on government funding and reputation endowed by officially recognised ranking and classification schemes, despite the gradual development of a market force and a social sector in China (e.g. Ren, 2012).

Taking a long view, the development of China's HE can be regarded as the result of consecutive reform initiatives designed by the Chinese government: The Project 211 (started in 1995), The Project 985 (started in 1998), the large-scale institutional mergers in the late 90s and HE expansion starting in 1999. For one thing, it forms and intensifies China's HE classification; for another, it contributes to the homogeneity of university structure and disciplinary arrangement. In this new first-class discipline initiative, not only there are more universities being involved, the focus also expands from 'individual university' to 'individual discipline' (academic unit). As organizations with strong resource dependency, it is argued that the university would respond and adapt to such changes to compete for more resources.

On the other hand, universities' responses depend on the often entrenched institutional culture, which inevitably functions upon the culture of the discipline. The cultural features of a discipline refer to the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of the discipline, which both derive from epistemological considerations of the discipline and relate to social and environmental factors

(Becher, 1984). Therefore, it is important to understand the interrelationship between the beliefs and the practices of academics and to discover how these affect and are affected by the natures of the particular inquiries they pursue. Disciplinary cultures can be shaped by environmental forces as well, whether those be in terms of their national contexts, their organizational settings, or their mutually reinforcing stereotypes.

Many Chinese universities started as specialized institutes, often with a single disciplinary identity. Now they have most turned to comprehensive curricular offerings, yet the original discipline(s) typically remain as their leading intellectual strength, and engrave a disciplinary culture into the university culture. More concretely, the leading scholars in those disciplinary arenas are often made university leaders and senior administrators, who supposedly have much more influence in the strategic planning process (Liu, 2005). Indeed, there has been a reciprocal legitimation between the existing modes of knowledge production (e.g., disciplines) and arrangements for the exercise of power (Weiler, 2001). Thus, the studies of disciplinary cultures could help clarify the role that academics play when co-opted into institutional policy-making settings, as well as the way in which external pressures are mediated by internal value systems.

This study takes account of resource dependency and disciplinary culture into the analysis of China's first-class discipline initiative. It proposes the following hypothesis: *The first-class discipline initiative will boost the heterogeneity of disciplinary structures among universities and institutional diversity of China's higher education system.* This study explores the following research question: *What is the impact of the first-class discipline initiative on disciplinary, institutional and systemic diversity?*

This study discussed an integrated two-period. The first period is between the announcement of this strategy in August 2015 and the publication of the final result in September 2017. This study investigated how each province and relevant university designs and adjusts its strategic plans in order to be enlisted in this new form of excellence classification project. It involved analysis of extensive

documentary evidence.

In the second period starting from September 2017, this study explored the impact of this new initiative and university practice on disciplinary, institutional and systematic diversity of China's HE. It takes a multi-case study design by strategically selecting four cases among carefully defined dimensions. It includes document research and semi-structured interviews of university leadership and academics to understand key stakeholders' interpretations and behaviors influenced by external pressures and internal value systems.

### **Implications**

Informed by extensive documents and in-depth case studies, this study is among the first to explore, evaluate and explain the impact of this China's significant HE strategy, by mapping the changes of disciplinary structure in Chinese universities. It also allows us to better understand the university's behavior when facing changing HE policies and often-entrenched institutional culture.

### **References**

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