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Diversification of Master's Degree in Hong Kong

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Research Domain: Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

Abstract:

Coursework based taught master's degrees have rapidly expanded globally in the last three to four decades with various programmes, modes of delivery, and diverse student profiles. This study aims to address the issue of student access and programme diversity in Hong Kong master's education. The research questions are as follows: How have students' profiles regarding origins, family backgrounds, and working experiences changed in master's programmes in Hong Kong? How have master's degree programmes diversified and what typology can be made in master's programmes in Hong Kong? Using the massification and diversification framework, the study will present how student profile has been diversified in master's degree and what typology of master's programmes exist in terms of degree titles, educational focus, student profile, and international orientation. The document analysis that were collected from government statistics and university websites will be applied.

Paper:

Research background

Master's education has experienced unprecedented global expansion and diversification since the 1990s, there has been little scholarship on the master's education. The majority of studies regarding postgraduate education have focused on doctoral education (O'Donnell et al., 2009) and there was a lack of effort to define master's education as a separate and legitimate degree (Conrad et al., 1993). It is even difficult to give exact figures because some degrees are awarded in multidisciplinary departments and are difficult to classify (Monk & Foote, 2015). Attaining an advanced degree has been regarded as a means to achieving greater academic, economic, and social opportunities. Increasing numbers of people pursue master's degrees today with the expectation of improving their knowledge, skills, competency, and employability. However, the value of an advanced degree is questionable today. Therefore, this study aims to address the issue of student access and programme diversity in Hong Kong master's education. The research questions are as follows: How have students' profiles regarding origins, family backgrounds, and working experiences changed in master's programmes in Hong Kong? How have master's degree programmes diversified and what typology can be made in master's programmes in Hong Kong?

Theoretical framework

This study will be based on massification and diversification framework. Why has this demand for master's programmes risen at all? The explanation is first related to the massification of higher education, and its relationship with the labour market (O'Donnell et al., 2009). In many advanced economies, holding a bachelor's degree has become universal, and university graduates seek further academic credentials through a master's degree. The overall expansion of higher education has also created more openings for faculty positions and doctoral education, which raises demand for master's degrees as a prerequisite for PhD programmes. The explanation also calls on how the internationalisation of higher education accelerates the inflow and outflow of master's students, because master's education generally takes a shorter period of study, compared to other levels of higher education, and students choose to go overseas to achieve their postgraduate education before entering a PhD. Indeed, many countries aggressively promote their master's programmes to recruit more international students. Additionally, master's education is the most privatised sector in higher education, as many universities have begun to offer diverse self-financed programmes in recent years. Master's programmes have become a major source of income for universities, and a determining factor in their reputation. Even for higher education systems with a strong public sector presence, master's programmes are mostly self-funded, unlike bachelor's or doctorate programmes.

Diversity in higher education has taken place in different levels or units in national system (i.e. public vs. private, research vs. teaching, binary systems), institutional, programme levels, or disciplines, and the present study mainly focuses on programme. Programme diversity was also strengthened due to the institutional competition that was caused by university positioning and ranking, and market-oriented approaches since the mid-1990s. Universities began to open new programmes.

Hong Kong context

Hong Kong has experienced the rapid massification of higher education since the 1990s, and the demands for postgraduate study have also increased since then. Although the size of the higher education system is small with only eight public universities, the self-financed coursework-based master's programmes are diversified with more than 500 programmes across the eight universities. In particular, professional types of master's degree programmes such as Master of Business Administration (MBA) have been expanded rapidly, and they have also embraced emerging types of programmes with on-line degree or joint degree with overseas universities. Based on a market-oriented approach, Hong Kong master's education has clearly represented new global trends of master's education.

Students' profiles in Hong Kong master's programmes are diverse in terms of origin of country (e.g. local, mainland China, and international) and previous working experiences. As Li & Bray (2007) described, university students' cross-border inflow and outflow in Hong Kong clearly predicts the global changes of postgraduate education. Furthermore, the typical postgraduate student is no longer a recent undergraduate pursuing full-time study. There has been a rise of the number of part-time adult students looking to deepen their practical knowledge to benefit their current professional

role and/or enhance their career prospects. This change is exactly taking place in Hong Kong context. Although most programmes are self-financed and the tuition fee is relatively high, students from different backgrounds are willing to invest their resources for one-year master's programs and the competition between institutions and programmes is becoming more intense to recruit diverse backgrounds of students and transform their programmes to satisfy students' new demands. The life-span of programmes in master's level is quicker than any other levels of higher education. Interestingly, there is no coherent government policy for master's education in Hong Kong as the most master's programmes are run and monitored by institutional or faculty level.

Data collection and analysis

Publicly available and institutionally provided secondary documents were reviewed. Primary data were collected from Hong Kong University Grants Committee (UGC) statistics on the number of postgraduate students by institution and changes in student profiles from 1996 to 2016. Based on the UGC data, the research is based on collected data on the employment status (i.e. full-time, further study and unemployed) of graduates from 2003 to 2016. University reports on student demographics were collected across programmes. Second source of documents were collected from university websites. There are currently more than 500 master's programmes in eight public universities in Hong Kong. All master's programmes will be identified through university and faculty websites and classified in terms of degree title, study-mode, tuition, and mission statement. All collected secondary documents will be summarised and categorised based on key contents. Content analysis and thematic analysis will be conducted.

Expected results and significance of study

Preliminary findings show that student profile in master's programmes in Hong Kong has been clearly two-tiered between full-time non-local students without working experience and part-time local students with working experience. Non-local students are mostly fresh university graduates, and local students are mostly adult learners with job experience. In particular, the socio-economic backgrounds of students have been changed in terms of family income and parent's occupations. Programmes have been diversified and expanded in institutional and faculty level, in particular, many new degree titles and spinoff programmes were created in a short period. However, there is a lack of distinctive identity in mission statement and learning aims across programmes. The research findings can provide implications for redesigning programmes to better meet the expectations of current master's degree students by considering the diversity of current students' backgrounds.

References

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