

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Incentives for international publications and the influence on research culture: Perspectives of Chinese Humanities and Social Sciences academics

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Abstract: Publications in internationally-indexed journals are becoming increasingly important in rankings and evaluations. Consequently, many countries and universities are incentivising such publications. In China, incentive schemes for Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) international publications include both monetary bonuses and career-related regulations, offering Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) publications larger bonuses and more benefits than domestic publications. Such practice and the subsequent influences echo discussions in the existing literature on academic evaluation, managerialism, and accountability culture in higher education. This study investigates the influence of such incentives on the research culture in Chinese HSS academia, drawing on interviews with 75 HSS academics, senior administrators, and journal editors in China. Findings revealed enormous disparities perceived by HSS academics across different institutions, disciplines, and backgrounds. In particular, the study reveals tensions between quality and qualification, integrity and instrumentalism, and equity and inequity.

Paper:

I. Introduction

Publications in internationally-indexed journals and their subsequent citations are becoming increasingly important in global university rankings, national research assessment, and institutional evaluation on academics (Ammon, 2001; Hazelkorn, 2015; Hicks, 2012). In response, incentives for international publications are prevailing in many universities, particularly those in non-English speaking countries (Chou, 2014; Franzoni, Scellato, & Stephan, 2011; Shin, 2007).

In China, more and more universities are formulating incentive schemes for Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) international publications. Such incentives included both monetary bonuses and career-related regulations, where Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) publications were often granted larger bonuses and higher ranks in research evaluations (Xu, 2019).

This phenomenon has generated heated discussion. Current debates speak to a growing body of literature on research assessment and research culture, especially in HSS, whose disciplinary cultures are different from sciences and technologies (e.g. De Rijcke, Wouters, Rushforth, Franssen, & Hammarfelt, 2016; Wilsdon et al., 2015). The debate also echoes discussions on managerial culture in higher education (e.g. Olssen & Peters, 2007; Waitere, Wright, Tremaine, Brown, & Pausé, 2011). However, in the Chinese context, academics' experience has not been examined to a large extent. Therefore, this study examines the influence of such incentives on the research culture in China, especially from HSS academics' perspectives.

II Methodology

This study draws on semi-structured interviews (September 2016 to May 2017) with 65 HSS academics, six senior administrators from six case universities, and four HSS journal editors in China.

Case universities were selected from 116 '985' and '211' universities, namely the exemplary universities in China with the aim to become world-class universities (Ma, 2007). The study involved three '985' universities and three '211' universities. Two universities had more than 2,000 SSCI and A&HCI publications, one had more than 1,000 but less than 2,000, and three had less than 1,000. Two universities are in northern China (thereby named as Uni-N1 and Uni-N2), two are in eastern China (Uni-E1 and Uni-E2), one is in western China (Uni-W), and the other one is in central China (Uni-C).

Among academic interviewees, 27 were from Humanities and 38 worked in Social Sciences. 15 were assistant professors, 29 were associate professors, and 21 were professors. 31 had overseas educational backgrounds, and 41 had international publications. One senior administrator at each case university and four Chinese journal editors were also interviewed.

Interview data was coded through three rounds of coding, from open coding, to pattern coding to develop categories (Saldaña, 2015), and to the last step of clustering, comparing, contrasting, building logical connections between codes, and generating themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

III Findings

Many interviewees reported the increasing awareness of internationalisation. Participants also argued that current incentive schemes had challenged or reinforced certain internal and external conflicts in research values, norms, and standards. The discussion clustered around three pairs of conflicts: quality and qualification, integrity and instrumentalism, and equity and inequity.

The awareness of internationalisation

Most academics interviewed considered the gist of incentives for international publications as promoting internationalisation. They perceived such incentives as 'the signal released by the university' (Academic from Uni-C) or 'the leverage for internationalisation' (Academic from Uni-E1), to 'guide and motivate' academics to become internationalised (Academic from Uni-C). In response,

some academics interviewed deemed the trend of internationalisation as 'essential' or 'inevitable' to the development of their discipline or institution and reported a supportive or compliant attitude. However, some interviewees were worried that the domestic research appeared to be treated as inferior to international research.

Quality and quantity

Although some academics and senior administrators considered incentives as focusing more on quality than quantity, 26 participants commented on 'quantitative evaluation' during interviews. They referred to 'quantity' as the number of publications, the impact factor (IF), or citations counts, which were used in institutional incentive documents or evaluation policies. Some academics criticised the quantitative evaluation culture, suggesting that 'assessing research based on quantity will ruin academic research' (Academic from Uni-E1). For instance, an academic interviewee viewed using IFs as opening the 'Pandora's box', as he noted that although using IFs produced positive influences on technical development in the world, there might be negative impacts accompanying. Some participants believed such quantitative evaluations were most objective, while acknowledging their limitations.

Integrity and instrumentalism

Interviews revealed that certain academic values shared throughout higher education were perceived as being challenged or fortified by institutional incentives. Particularly, academics depicted the perceived threats to the commitment to the pursuit of truth, but they also noted a reinforced notion of academic rigour in incentivising international publications. Academics interviewed also demonstrated a common concern of instrumentalism shaped by the incentives, feeling obliged to make compromises or refusing to adapt to the 'utilitarian culture'.

Equity and inequity

Academics presented various views on whether incentives had increased the level of equality or intensified the dilemma of inequality. Some found publishing internationally as an alternative to escape from the perceived monopoly of established academics, leading to fairness in academia. However, some perceived a reinforced inequity, directly or indirectly shaped by current incentives. Participants argued that academics from different institutions, disciplines, backgrounds, or at different career stages faced different levels of difficulty in publishing internationally; therefore, it is unequal to every academic if international publications were prioritised: 'The reward for some people is the deprivation of others' (Academic from Uni-E2). Such debates were widespread in interviews with academics, administrators, and editors from various backgrounds, disciplines, institutions, and age groups.

IV Conclusions and implications

The study reveals the influence of incentivising HSS international publications on the research culture in Chinese academia. Findings revealed enormous disparities perceived by HSS academics across different institutions, disciplines, and backgrounds. Some of the discussed influences are in accordance with the consequences of managerialism and accountability culture in higher education (Blackmore, 2003; Olssen, 2016), and some extend the existing literature on academic evaluations, especially in HSS. Considering the negative influences of the managerial approach in current incentives, the study proposes several implications for institutional policymaking in China and countries with similar positions in the global knowledge system.

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