

Students' Participation in Higher Education Governance in Mainland China

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Abstract—Universities have been one of the most important institutions in society. They shoulder the responsibility to do research and teach further generations. Therefore, the governance of universities has been a heated topic and has been learned for years. Recently, it witnessed great changes, for example, the massification of Higher Education (HE), marketization, and privatization. As a result, more stakeholders are involved in the governance of HE, among which students' participation in HE becomes more important. However, the research about students' participation in HE governance in China is not sufficient, and the situation requires improvement. The paper aims to not only fill in the research gap but also put forward practical suggestions to follow the world's trend of HE governance. The methodology of this paper is literature analysis with comparative studies between China and western countries. The research points out that the current situation of students' participation in HE governance is unideal due to problems in three fields, values and concepts, mechanisms and systems, as well as student unions. Then, the policy implications are based on these reasons: universities should highlight students' status, respect their subjectivity and adhere to the service awareness; the government requires to build a sound legal system while universities should establish complete mechanisms and systems; student unions should be encouraged by universities to take part in HE governance affairs with sufficient funds, and autonomy. On the one hand, this paper is a further application of four rationales (consumerism, political-realism, communitarian, democracy, and consequentialism) created by Luescher-Mamashela for the inevitable trend of students' participation in HE governance. On the other hand, the suggestions it made benefit the students, universities, and society in practical ways.

Keywords—Students' participation, higher education governance, Chinese higher education, university power.

I. INTRODUCTION OF STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN HE GOVERNANCE

UNIVERSITIES have been one of the most important institutions in society. They teach students, educate professionals, fight for justice, and provide a liberal education that challenges and expands outdated thinking [1]. Because of the significance of universities to our society, HE governance has been a heated topic for years. In this work, OECD defines governance holistically as: "the structures, relationships and process through which, at both national and institutional levels, policies for tertiary education are developed, implemented and reviewed" [1].

The role and functions of universities are changing, so students' participation in governance has become more important. Universities are not fixed or isolated. They have been in a dynamic and shifting environment, and witnessed

great changes advanced by neoliberals and global governing [1]. They include massification of HE, market-driven behaviors among universities [1], industry-university relations, systemic integration of HE institutions [2], shift in funding, etc. These changes make previous HE governance, where no a single group of people (senior academic members) control HE incompatible with present realities universities face. Now, many different stakeholders participate in governance. Particularly, scholars [1], [3] attach great importance to student participation in university governance.

A. Research Question

Although problems in students' participation in higher education governance occurs in many places in the world, the paper mainly focuses on China and aims to find out the current barriers of students' participation in HE governance in China, reasons, and implications.

The research question of this paper is 'How students' participation in HE Governance in Mainland China can be improved', and it could be further divided into three sub-questions: What are the current problems in students' participation of HE governance in China? Why do they occur? How to deal with them?

This paper contains seven parts. Firstly, it describes the topic briefly, learning the relationship among HE, its governance and students' participation. The second section shows the research questions and plan of the paper. The third part deals with the significance of the research while the fourth section points out the limitations of this paper. Then, the fifth part analyzes the topic by studying the status quo in the world and in China. In order to put forward implications in the Chinese context, we provide its background information, and analyze current situation. The conclusion section functions as the summary of this paper with references after it.

B. Significance of Studying Students' Participation in HE Governance

Learning students' participation in HE governance is significant both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, four rationales (consumerism, political-realism, communitarian, democracy and consequentialism) created by Luescher-Mamashela [5] could be applied to make further explanation.

Consumerism states that the participation of students in HE governance is inevitable because universities charge more tuition fees [3]. There is a contractual relationship between

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universities, as providers of services, and students, as consumers of services [4]. As a result, “the arguments for including students as consumers in university governance point to students having rights to representation in order to safeguard their interests” [1].

Political-realism regards students as internal stakeholders, or a politically significant constituency of the university [5]. In this dimension, “university should function as a representative democracy” [1], in which voices from all stakeholders should be heard. Students could function in political activism by avoiding ‘monolithic mode of governance’, “where a single group dominates decision making; this dominant group has traditionally been the professoriate” [5].

The communitarian case regards students as members of a university community. “The role and status of students as members of a collectivity engaged in the educational process is at the heart of the communitarian claim to student involvement in university decision making” [5]. There are intertwined responsibilities between students and other stakeholders [1], who are both essential ingredients of organizational practice [4].

The last rationale is democracy and consequentialism focusing on citizenship and democracy. Universities are considered as platforms for education of democracy, on which students can develop democratic values and learn how to be a democratic citizen [1].

The research is significant also because of its practical contributions. First, students’ participation benefits the quality of policy-making for universities via overcoming bureaucracy [3], increasing students’ satisfaction and trust towards university [6] and building a stronger connection between students and the university executives [7]. Second, by participating in university governance, students could learn more non-academic skills and knowledge, including critical thinking, collaboration, democratic civilization [6]. Third, it contributes to the society by preparing productive citizens as future generations. Universities cultivate future leaders and qualified citizens, who are required to have a mastery of literacy and abilities of participation [8]. By supporting the active participation of students, universities could let them practice citizenship in an academic community, thus fulfilling their mission of educating active citizens [9].

II. CONTEXT OF STUDENTS’ PARTICIPATION IN HE GOVERNANCE

A. Status Quo of Students’ Participation in HE Governance Worldwide

Generally, students’ participation in HE governance is characterized by low turnout and shortage of opportunities for students. Students’ participation in HE governance originated in Europe, but currently “a rough estimate across European countries suggests that student turnout in most cases is less than one third” [10]. In China, up to 59.8% of selected students think universities ignore their basic right to take a role in HE affairs while 46.2% think there are a few or even no participation opportunities [11]. In Ethiopia, not only is the number of

student participating in university affairs limited, but also the nature and quality of their participation is worrying [4]. The Portuguese case demonstrates that student turnout at elections in the Universities of Aveiro and Minho is in general very low, often below 10% [12]. In Italy, “the perception of students is that the accountability of decision-making bodies in universities is limited and that student elections are not so important” [9].

There are multiple reasons why students’ participation in HE governance is generally unsatisfying. First, both universities and students underestimate students’ roles in HE governance. University administrators hold outdated value about students’ status [3] while students tend to underrate the significance of their involvement in decision-making processes. Second, supports from universities towards students’ participation is insufficient [4]. ‘Institutions are apparently unwilling to promote their development by holding information and power on academic and institutional issues [12]’. Furthermore, there is a trend of formalism in students’ participation [12], which is only considered as a window dressing for democracy. Instead of promoting students in governance, ‘it appears to be more driven by ‘the cultures of tokenism’ and the sense of ‘political correctness’ that institutions wish to display [4]’.

B. Phenomenon of Students’ Participation in HE Governance in China

While students’ participation is an important issue globally, this work focuses on the context of mainland China, including its history, status quo and problems.

Chinese HE highlights the status of students from a very early time. In ancient China, Yuelu College Academic Regulations encouraged students to debate with teachers, who were considered as ‘authority’ [11]. During the Republic of China period, students began to participate in Chinese HE governance. Three features characterized students’ participation in HE governance: the power of students, professors and administrators constituted the key force in the internal governance; safeguarding the rights and interests of students are given top priority; students’ union is an important guarantee for students’ participation [11]. After Economic Reform and Open up, Chinese HE witnessed massification and commercialization, which increased the complexity and difficulty of its governance. In order to adapt to the society, the Chinese government took actions to unify leadership with hierarchical governance, manage the relationship between government and universities, and promote the autonomy of universities [13]. However, reforms of university governance did not consider the significance of students. In fact, “non-administrative members are scarcely mentioned as constituents across statutes except for faculty representatives...with student representatives not mentioned at all in the mechanism.” [14]. Reasons could be classified into three fields: for concepts and values, universities underestimate students’ status [11]; for mechanism and system, universities lack supports in both [3], [11]; for student unions, they experienced power alienations [11].

III. ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN HE GOVERNANCE

A. Analysis of Reasons of Low Students' Participation in HE Governance in China

As mentioned above, reasons in three fields (concepts and values, mechanisms and systems, student unions) have caused students' low participation in HE governance. This section will make a further illustration of these aspects.

Concepts and Values

The lack of awareness of students' participation lies in the shortage of multiple structures in HE governance. The single structure leads to the ignorance of students among governance subjects. However, for the dominant power in HE governance, there are two different voices. According to [11], HE governance in China shows dual power structure, including administrative and academic power. On one hand, influenced by the national administrative system, the governance of Chinese universities shows the bureaucratic administrative governance model, and the administrative power is given priority [11]. Furthermore, influenced by the planned economy [15] and the ideology of centralized governance [16], leaders of universities have the substantive power of its governance, resulting in a single priority of administrative power [15], [16]. On the other hand, traditional universities also highlight academic power because of the values of "academic governance" [11]. Therefore, the administrative power and the academic power co-exist and influence each other, forming a "dual" power structure in Chinese universities [11].

Both these two perspectives illustrate that Chinese HE institutions lack a diversified governance model. The single governance model does not allow the universities to highlight students' creativity and subjectivity, leading to the hesitation, negativity and distrust of students in HE governance from teachers and some students.

Mechanisms and Systems

Experiences in Western universities demonstrate that students' participation in HE governance should be the basic concept of modern universities, and should be internalized in the design of university systems and mechanisms [11]. However, the status quo is unsatisfying in China.

With the massification of HE in China, students' roles are getting more and more attention. In order to protect students' interests, laws and regulations have been made. However, the implementation of them has faced great difficulties. According to [15], due to the lack of specific operation methods, laws could not be implemented effectively and are only considered as theories. Research demonstrates that this problem roots in the insufficient attention, implementation and promotion by the government [15].

In addition to laws, university systems also play an important role in students' participation in HE governance. They could be regarded as the extension and specific implementation of laws [16]. However, those widely used political systems in China have not been applied effectively in universities, including the information system, democratic consultation system, channel

construction system, [16] while systems in operation now do not work effectively.

What's more, the establishment of university mechanisms is also unideal. Universities face many obstacles in establishing and improving guarantee mechanisms, incentive mechanisms, and supervision mechanisms of students' participation in HE governance [11]. It roots in the traditional value that emphasizes obedience to orders and unity of will, as well as the highly centralized governance mode that promotes administrative governance and underestimates democratic spirit.

Student Unions

Student unions consist of a group of students, with the purpose of protecting their rights and interests. However, in China they do not function well due to serious power differential caused by excessive interference and guidance from the university.

The reliance of student unions on university governance and the traditional Chinese value of giving priority to teachers lead to the excessive guidance and interference with student unions by university leaders. Student unions depend much on the university in economic sources; thus, administrators believe that the power of student unions come from the university rather than students [16]. As a result, student unions should represent the interest of the university [17]. In addition to the financial dependence, the traditional Chinese value of 'highlighting the role of administrators' leads these unions to serve the university, instead of fulfilling the real requirements of the students [18].

The excessive guidance and interference by university leaders influenced the way student unions work. Universities put forward policy implications; spread the ideas of Communist Party of China; determine the goals, methods and routes of unions' development [17]. University administrators also take the responsibility of deciding selection standards, methods and procedures of executive members; therefore, their opinions become the most important and even the only criteria [17]. This 'top-down' governance leads to the loss of students' real voice. As a result, student unions did not take the responsibility to represent or protect students.

In sum, aspects mentioned above result in serious power differential exemplified formalization and de-functionalization. Formalization means that student unions actually represent the interests of universities in the name of students while de-functionalization refers to the inaction of students' unions faced with issues of students' rights and interests. Formalization focuses on the nature of student unions while de-functionalization studies the process of implementation. Student unions as they are called have become channels of publicity for the willpower of universities and auxiliary institutions of administrative department [11]. What's more, during the process of actions, they stand for the will of university administrators, thus losing their original functions and leading to the passive response and obedience of unions to universities [11].

B. Solutions to the Problem of Students' Participation in HE Governance in China

The significance of students' participation calls for improvement in terms of concepts and values, mechanisms and systems as well as students unions. This section discusses above problems based on different rationales respectively.

Concepts and Values

The single governance model and traditional values result in the loss of creativity and central status of students, thus exacerbating universities' negative attitudes towards students' participation in HE governance. However, consumerism provides a rationale that emphasizes students' participation. It demonstrates that the increasing tuition fees has become an important source in the cost of HE institutions and changed students into consumers.

Students pay for their study, and should be given rights in HE governance [11]. Thus, consumerism requires universities to, on one hand, protect students' central status; on the other hand, adhere to the service awareness of HE institutions.

In order to protect students' status, administrators of universities should attach great importance to students' awareness of rights protection and opportunities to participate in HE affairs [19] at the ideological level. Furthermore, a power-diversified university environment needs to be established [11]. Chinese HE institutions lack power-diversified environment. However, only multiple powers from shared and co-governance can satisfy the rights and demands of various stakeholders and realize the goal of public interest in university governance [11]. As a result, universities need to break the structure of either the dominant power of administrators or the dual power of academics and administrators.

Additionally, universities need to improve their service awareness. With the massification of HE, students' identity of 'customers' are further strengthened [11]. The market pattern determines the participants, who are customers, could take part in universities' shared governance [11]. In this case, universities, as the providers of services, should establish their service awareness towards students. On one hand, students should be considered as core stakeholders of the university [11], and have the rights to express their increasing demands and request for higher quality services [20]. On the other hand, universities should admit students' rights to vote for university affairs [11]. Only in this way could universities provide better services for its customers.

Mechanisms and Systems

Deficiencies in laws, systems, and mechanisms influenced students exercise of 'political power' according to political-realism. Political-realism advances the notion of students as internal stakeholders and a politically significant constituency of the university that should participate in its governance [5]. Thus, political-realism requires universities to provide better mechanisms and systems for students' participation in HE governance.

Laws function as the premise for complete mechanisms and

systems. Relevant laws in China show two major issues. On one hand, students' rights to participate in HE governance is simply stated in laws and regulations, but the detailed information is not stated accurately [11]. On the other hand, many laws and regulations are issued by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, whose legal effect is not as powerful as those formulated by National People's Congress [11].

In order to establish mechanisms and systems for internal governance of HE institutions in China, the government needs to build a sound legal system first to clarify the rights and obligations of university internal governance, form a scientific governance model and regulate internal governance behaviors [11]. This legal system should confirm the legal status of students' rights [11] and clarify the scope of their participation, forms of participation and methods of implementation [20].

Mechanisms and systems are also valuable for students' participation in HE governance. Many mechanisms and systems function in HE, such as reward mechanism, supervision mechanism, participation mechanism, evaluation systems, among which, establishing a hierarchical mechanism for students' participation should be given priority. At present, students' participation of HE governance is limited. However, there is an increasing demand of it, which means their participation should be extended to the governance of various university affairs, both academic and non-academic [11]. Expanding the field of student participation and degree of it should become an important content and direction of students' participation in university governance [11].

There are also other mechanisms and systems that require to be established or improved. In terms of reward mechanism, scholarships should be set to encourage students [16]; for supervision mechanism, relevant institutions (university committees, students' management committees) should be established to observe and supervise the process of students' participation in HE governance [11]; talking of evaluation systems, students' participation should be incorporated into all levels of university's evaluation agencies and quality assurance systems, which could institutionalize and standardize their participation, and provide them with necessary support and guarantees [16].

Student Unions

Student unions in China depend highly on HE governance, leading to the excessive interference and guidance from the university. It results in the power alienations-formalization and de-functionalization of student unions.

Student unions should firstly reduce its reliance on the university. Sufficient and stable funds are the basis for the running of student unions; therefore, universities should guarantee the allocation of funds to student unions [21]. Financial officers should be responsible for the management of funds and its annual report; a monitoring mechanism should supervise the use of funds and disclose it to the public; various student foundations should be established to obtain profits by operating projects, having social fundraising and alumni fundraising [21].

Additionally, universities should give student unions more autonomy by creating a tolerate environment, in which students can develop their personality and self-governance [22]. In this case, universities are suggested to provide guidance of the general direction [22], instead of excessive interference with every aspect of the running of student unions. In addition, student unions should be encouraged by universities to take part in HE governance to strengthen their function. They could take part in the design of university rules and regulations, administration of student service, and the evaluation of Teaching [16]. By doing so, students unions can protect the interests of students, thus fulfilling its original missions.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF THIS PAPER

There are two major limitations of this paper. The first is that we do not take distinctions of universities in China into consideration. HE institutions in China vary widely. In terms of the ranking, there are universities in the 985 project (top ranking universities), the 211 project (second ranking universities) and others. In terms of geography, there are universities in relatively developed areas along the eastern coast and others in less developed regions. In terms of the nature of universities, there are Comprehensive University, University of Science and Technology, Normal University, University of Finance and Economics, etc. Because of the difference in teaching philosophy, realistic conditions, students' training plan, students' participation of HE governance should be discussed respectively.

The second problem is that among current literatures, there are few studies based on students' thoughts and perceptions. Most of the existing research does not target students which leads to insufficient knowledges of their actual thoughts. Without taking students into consideration, the implications put forward by researches might be biased.

The above problems result in the vulnerabilities of this research, which should be overcome and avoided in future research.

V. CONCLUSION

The research question of this paper is 'How students' participation in HE Governance in Mainland China can be improved'? The paper answers it by pointing out the major problem, analyzing the reasons and putting forward implications.

The main problem is the loss of students' voice in Chinese HE governance, which is caused by reasons in fields of values and concepts, mechanisms and systems, as well as student unions. Then, the policy implications are based on these reasons: universities should highlight students' status, respect their subjectivity and adhere to the service awareness; the government requires to build a sound legal system while universities should establish complete mechanisms and systems; student unions should be encouraged by universities to take part in HE governance affairs with sufficient funds, and autonomy.

The research mentioned above helps to reduce research gaps,

while its limitations could be avoided in the future. For instance, more students' opinions should be heard, gathering through questionnaires and interviews. This paper is based on previous literature reviews, where students' perspectives are not sufficient, leading to less consideration of their motivations. Universities also should be better classified for more accurate and targeted analysis. There are many differences among universities, but the same kind of HE institutions always have something in common. These commonplaces help us understand this topic under different circumstances. Thus, proper classification of universities should be applied into future research.

In conclusion, the improvement in students' participation of HE governance will be a long journey and it requires long term attention from the government, universities, students and researchers.

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