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Diversification to a degree: The student intake and experience at different types of higher education institutions in China (0148)

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This paper investigates the impact of the introduction of new types of higher education institutions (HEIs) in China. It examines to what extent and in what ways new institutional types differ from more established types in terms of student intake and the experience of students. The paper builds on an exploratory study conducted at four HEIs based in a city in the south-east of China. This study employed a mixed-method approach, and the data sources consisted of a student survey, focus group meetings with students, interviews with senior managers at the four HEIs, expert interviews and analysis of public and institutional documents. The paper will discuss the differences in student intake and student experience found at the four institutions. It will explore possible explanations for differences and similarities found and will discuss implications of the findings for the future development of an increasingly diverse higher education sector in China.

Diversification to a degree: The student intake and experience at different types of higher education institutions in China

The Chinese higher education system has experienced a dramatic expansion in student numbers since 1998 and has seen the mushrooming of several new types of degree-granting institutions. These include private colleges and the so-called independent colleges (*duli xueyuan*), which are set-up by established universities and colleges with the support of private investment, be it from private companies or individuals (Ministry of Education, 2008b). Many existing public vocational colleges have also been promoted to the Bachelor's level during the same time. In a very short period of time, the new private and independent institutions have developed into a primary provider of higher education in China, together with the newly established or promoted public colleges they provided most of the additional capacity needed for the expansion in massive student numbers (Ministry of Education, 2008a).

Therefore, the Chinese higher education system has become a complex enterprise comprising various different types of institutions. However, there has been very little discussion of the role of the new institutional types and almost no empirical research into the kind of education these institutions offer to their students.

This paper investigates the regulatory framework within which the diverse higher education institutions in China operates, their respective position within the rapidly developing higher education landscape of China, the role they play in making higher education accessible for more students from more diverse backgrounds, and the impact of the diversification of higher education institutions on students'

experiences. The investigation is based on an analysis of official documents and empirical research at four higher education institutions in a city in south-eastern China. The four institutions differ from each other in their history, structure, size, ownership status, student intake and programme provision. The sampling of these institutions was purposive to include four ownership and status types: public university, public college, independent college, private college. The research employed a mixed-method approach, and the data sources consist of a survey of students on their experiences, focus group meetings with students and teachers, interviews with senior managers at the HEIs and experts in the field.

The student experience survey was developed on the basis of existing surveys used in the Australian, UK and US context (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and Graduate Careers Council of Australia, 2005; Hanbury, 2007; HEFCE, 2007; Kuh, 2007) but was made more relevant to the Chinese context through field consultations and piloting at Chinese universities and colleges. The survey yielded 1,264 filled in questionnaires. The findings of the survey were discussed and exemplified by interviews with leaders at the four participating universities and colleges, by five expert interviews, and by focus group interviews with teachers and students, in order to generate contextually meaningful explanations (Ertl et al., 2008).

The survey data clearly indicates that the four institutions attract different types of students both in terms of prior achievements and socio-economic backgrounds. The private and independent colleges in the sample mainly attract students who are at the lower end of the achievement spectrum at high school level, while students at the two public institutions in the sample have significantly higher entrance exam scores. In terms of where students come from, the independent college recruits more than the other institutions from urban areas. Its intake of students from rural areas was significantly lower than that at the other three institutions. Moreover, the parents of independent college students had the strongest educational backgrounds in the four institutions and held the better occupational positions compared with the parents of students studying at the other institutions. The pattern that emerges is the following: the independent college seems to attract low-achieving students from wealthy backgrounds. This differs markedly from the private college which also attracts low-achieving students but from significantly poorer backgrounds.

The differences in socio-economic background of students are also reflected in the levels of concerns students have with regard to the cost of their studies. Despite the fact that students at independent colleges pay significantly higher tuition fees, their levels of financial concern are not higher than for students studying at the two public institutions which charge much lower fees. However, students at the private college are on average much more concerned about finances: 45% of students at the private college state that they are very concerned about the cost of their studies, which is double the level of concern of students at the other three institutions. The levels of financial concern have, as we will see, important impacts on students' aspirations for further study.

The paper will also discuss students' experience of various aspects of higher education: approaches to teaching, educational emphasis of programmes and institutions, teaching and learning facilities, and learning approaches. However, although the four institutions vary greatly in ownership, status, and prestige, the students in the survey perceived their learning experience very similarly across the four institutions. The study found larger differences between disciplines within institutions than within disciplines between institutions. Were disparities between different institutions' students' experiences appeared, they were in most cases quite small and statistically insignificant. Where there were significant differences, differences were usually caused by students' subject of study and socio-economic and academic background, and other factors over which the institutions had less control.

The paper will explore potential reasons for this, including the patterns of institutional convergence, driven in part by the governmental regulatory framework; the forces of competition, driven in part by the perceived hierarchy of reputation of institutions, which may lead to new institutions imitating more established institutions; the use of retired teaching staff from older institutions at the newly-created institutions; and the arguably conservative and tradition-oriented nature of Chinese society in general, and attitudes to education in particular.

The recent establishment of private and independent colleges has resulted in a significant new sector, has contributed to a changing student composition in HE, and has shifted the higher education system in China from being almost entirely public to a system where a significant proportion of students are enrolled in non-public institutions. However, in terms of programme provision and student experience, the new types of institutions seem operate in a way that does not differ substantially from the public college or even the public university. This has resulted in a paradox: for all the ideological push associated with the distinctiveness of private and independent institutions, much of the practical drive for establishing these institutions is intended to reduce state costs, rather than to promote diversity.

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