

Chapter 1

Governance of Higher Education Institutions in China: Structures and Trends

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the background, structures, problems and challenges, reforms, and trends in the governance of higher education institutions in China. It concludes that the centralized governance and management system of higher education institutions in China is deeply affected by the long history of centralized culture, and the current administrative and management system of state political power. The system has undergone many reforms and changes, and it is expected to undergo more reforms and changes in the coming decades.

INTRODUCTION

The governance and management of higher education institutions in China is specified by different national laws and regulations. The State Council and local government at various levels are responsible for guiding and administering educational work, applying the principles of administration at different levels and an appropriate division of responsibilities. Secondary education and education at lower levels are administered by the local governments of the people under the guidance of the State Council, while higher education is administered by the State Council, and/or the provincial governments, governments of the autonomous regions, or municipalities directly under the central government. This governance and management system of Chinese higher education has its roots in a long history of centralized culture, and the administrative and management system of the country, but it is also affected by the current administrative and management system of China.

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Over the last 30 years, an increasing number of domestic scholars have engaged in the field of higher education and have published valuable research related to the structures of governance in higher education institutions from different perspectives, and of the trends in those structures. The structures of higher education governance have been a particular focus of research.

Gu and Meng (2003) discussed a new concept of international teaching, which is strongly reflected in modern education. In their study, they examined a wide range of new educational concepts drawn from Western developed countries and the Soviet Union over the preceding three decades and explain them with broad vision and simple writing. These concepts include postmodern education, cooperative education, environmental education, and innovative education. These concepts have laid the theoretical foundation for the development of the higher education system. Focusing on the reform of higher education system, Wang and Liu (2009) argued that there was a need for the structural adjustment of higher education, including adjustment of the internal organizational structure of higher education, adjustment of the external organizational structure of higher education, and adjustment of the structure of planning in higher education institutions. More specifically, they considered many measures, including establishing a college system, college mergers and the construction of university towns. They also pointed out that the change from “management” to “governance” was not only a major transformation in the strategy of governing the country, but also a fundamental change in the policy of higher education. Taking the internal power structure as a starting point, Zhu and Yu (2013) examined the relationship between the Party and the Chinese government and proposed that the state should establish a coordinated and orderly university governance mechanism. As to higher education institutions, it was suggested that universities needed to establish institutional linkages between the School Council and the Party Committee (the Standing Committee) in order to build an effective structure of internal university governance that fully conformed to national conditions, and thus make a breakthrough in the reform of higher education. Based on the previous study of Zhu and Yu (2013), Zhou (2014) pointed out that the core issue of higher education governance was the distribution of decision-making power, which included three aspects: system level, university level, and grassroots academic organization. In his research, Zhou summarized ten issues in China’s higher education governance, namely separation of politics and school, social accountability, organization, corporate governance structure, the university board of directors, the mechanism for selecting the university president, academic power, the internal organizational structure, the autonomy of grassroots academic organization, and the construction of the university charter.

Another focus of research was related to the trends in higher education governance. Yuan (2014), Qu (2014), and Bie (2015) studied the modernization of governance systems and governance capabilities in higher education, and how they have adapted to changing times. With the same focus on governance systems and trends, Liu and Yang (2016) studied social participation in higher education governance from a comparative perspective. They held that China must adjust the role of the government, and change the way the government governs, to improve national legislation and university regulations, establish a modern university system, and improve disclosure of information, social accountability, and supervisory systems. Compared with traditional Western universities, Li and Yin (2016) proposed that Chinese higher education had different core values and characteristics, mainly including their independent faculty and freedom of thought, active participation in government-led national construction projects, and internationalization of Chinese universities represented by two-way exchanges of teachers and students, as well as international cooperation with Confucius Institutes. Lao (2015) and Zhan (2016), additionally, made a study on the modern university system, which was a key issue and core objective in the implementation of the Higher Education Law of the People’s Republic of China. They found out that university

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