Working Together To Foster Education Innovation - The Student Dimension In University Governance

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Abstract: A major challenge for both building and sustaining successful universities is considering how university governance can foster innovation, facilitating universities to be prominent players on a global higher education stage. A recent case study of a young Chinese university, Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech), illustrates how drawing on the greatest resource at a university's disposal, namely, its students, is central to this endeavor, by allowing for a model of shared university governance to play a key role in stimulating education innovation. The path to education innovation is discussed, indicating the challenges and opportunities involved with university governance in an ever-changing Chinese societal context.At the same time, several dramatic changes have taken place in higher education globally, also impacting on China's higher education. Among the new developments is the growing effect of internationalization on higher education activities, policies and planning. Its diverse and unprecedented effects make it one of the major forces shaping higher education in the 21st century. One of the main issues facing the sector is its innovation capacity and the ability to use this for the transformation of the higher education landscape, through effective university governance. How are students part of this?Among the themes that have emerged from this study are leadership, execution of clearly-defined institutional goals, funding, development of a strong academic and institutional culture, and recruitment of talented academic staff and students. Recommendations are made to deal with the challenge of transforming organizational culture, especially given the recent focus on internationalization. This study illustrates how becoming a world-class university, at the frontier of education innovation, can happen when government, universities and society come together to transform words into concrete action. The student dimension represents one of the central keys to successful university governance and, more generally, innovation in higher education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities typically play marginal roles in innovation in developing countries, functioning more as training grounds for those who work in a knowledge-based economy (Liefner& Schiller 2008, Vega-Jurado et al 2008). However, with the rise of the knowledge economy, universities are increasingly seen as a source of innovation. China places great emphasis on boosting its innovative capability, which it states is essential to meet the challenges in economic development in a rapidly-evolving global context. Universities are considered as an integral part of China's national innovation system. What this means in practice is that China is reflecting on how to harness the creativity of its students, to power its agenda of innovation in education.

Innovation in education needs strong governance. Governance, as distinct from management, concerns how academic decisions are made. Universities, though bureaucratic (Altbach&Salmi, 2011) differ significantly from other large organizations in numerous ways. To be successful, universities must include those who teach and do research (faculty, students and the academic community) in the decision-making (the governance) of the institution. This is especially true when it comes to research universities, which most universities, including SUSTech, increasingly aspire to be.

Academic leadershipis of increasing importance in an era of complex and highly visible academic organizations. The role of the university president, vice chancellor, or rector, being bothmanagerial and academic, is crucial to a university's growth and development. So, too, is the role of students, as leadership opportunities, including their voice in governance, can lead to greater levels of education innovation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of a number of leadership models in recent years directed at students in higher education, including the Social Change Model of Leadership development (HERL, 1996), the Leadership

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Challenge (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) and the Relational Leadership Model (Komives et al., 2007), has been a welcome development. All of these modelsidentifya need to develop students' leadership skills.

Given that many perceive a lack of leadership in multiple contexts in the world today, leadership development amongst students is a sine qua non for society's progress. Higher education is uniquely placed to make a difference by developing their leadership potential (Komives et al., 2011; Patterson, 2012). This will ultimately lead to innovation in higher education.Engaging stakeholders, including alumni and the student body, benefits universities (Dugan &Komives, 2007). Stakeholders can facilitate the development of relationships that will improve the governance of a university, particularly if they have a voice in that process.

The Leadership Challenge

Kouzes and Posner's (1995) model of leadership revealed five central practices of leaders, namely (a) challenging the status quo by engaging in meaningful projects, (b) inspiring a vision shared by all, (c) empowering others to act, (d) showing the way, and (e) motivating those they lead. This model has been used extensively in leadership development programs at universities (Kass&Gandzol, 2011), with the aim being to encourage capacity-building by developing leaders over time.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership compares transactional leadership (based on exchange) with transformational leadership (when people participate in the processes of change, leading to greater personal transformation), and originated in the work of Burns (2003). This leadership model encompasses four components, namely: idealized influence, which is a leader's ability to function as a role model for followers; inspirational motivation, which motivates followers through a process of inclusion; intellectual stimulation, which is a leader's ability to inspire followers; and individualized consideration, where leaders engage in activities such as mentoring (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This model has since gained prominence in many higher education institutions globally (Northouse, 2012).

Adaptive Leadership

Heifetz' (1994:22) model of adaptive leadership hypothesizes that leadership is necessary for addressing challenges of an adaptive nature. According to Heifetz, a change in values, beliefs, or behaviour is required for successful leadership in times of change. Leadership develops through instruction and reflection in the classroom (Parks, 2005).

The Social Change Model

Comprising seven interconnected core values, the social change model of leadership comprises three individual values (consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment), three group values (collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility), and one social/community value (citizenship) (Komives et al, 2009). Similar to Heifetz's adaptive leadership model (1994), the social change model requires changes in values. It can lead to greater civic engagement, where growth as a leader occurs in the three core areas of knowing, being and doing (Komives et al 2009).

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership contains elements of transformational leadership, adaptive leadership and the social change model. To be successful, leaders must develop leadership contributions from many others in their organizations. Distributed leadership is founded on practices used to influence people in an organization, which are applied by a number of stakeholders. However, distributed leadership can also make use of sources of influence which do not include people, such asJermier and Kerr's (1997) "substitutes for leadership", which view leadership as an organization-wide phenomenon (Pounder, Ogawa & Adams, 1995). In other words, distributed leadership adopts a set of actions, or practices, that "are enacted by people at all levels rather than a set of personal characteristics and attributes located in people at the top" (Fletcher &Kaufer, 2003:22). In essence, leadership is shared, collaborative and participative. This can lead to increased opportunities for the organization to profit from the abilities of a greater number of its members.

Influences on leadership behaviours

School leadership ranks second only to teaching as a school-related factor affecting student learning (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Stone-Johnson, 2015). This most likely holds true for universities also, perhaps to varying degrees. Research suggests student leadership opportunities at university have not been as frequent as they could have been (Hilliard, 2010). According to Bartee (2012), integrating theory and practice is a recognized element of quality leadership preparation programs. Some studies have suggested that one way to integrate theory and practice is through volunteer or student club/organization activities, as the more hours students spend per week performing such activities, the more likely they are as a result to show evolution and growth in leadership areas (Bardou et al, 2003).

Massification and post-massification also influences leadership behaviours. Recent years have seen the expansion of China's education system. This has led to China, in common with many other developing countries, facing a growing dilemma in its higher education system – expanding access while seeking to improve quality (Gallagher et al. 2009; Wu, 2007; Xue, 2006). With increasing competition in the labour market

arena, coupled with social pressure for access to higher education, universities must in some respects move from the global back to the local. To do this, to equip students with the skills they need for employment, Chinese universities must reform (and continue to reform) both their curricula and governance. Students can play a decisive role in this (Bótas& Huisman, 2012).

III. BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Established in 2012, the university in this study is a public institution with a student cohort of almost 4,000 students.The university is expanding quickly, thanks in no small part to generous government funding.A university with research, innovation and entrepreneurship as its mission, there is a male-female student ratio of 3:1. Goals are clearly defined by the institution, which is seen as one of the reasons that expansion is happening successfully (Jowi et al., 2013).

Chemistry, Physics and Communications Engineering are the top three programs studied by students. In the regular curriculum, the chief characteristics of undergraduate education are the high prevalence of small classes (twenty students or fewer), the expansion of English a medium of instruction, and the intensification of its math courses. The low student-professor ratio (1:10) provides students with abundant opportunities to interact with their professors and enhance their higher-order intellectual skills.Approximately eighty percent of the university's graduates undertake graduate studies abroad, primarily in the US.

The university plans to intensify English education and to conduct all courses in English, to further its aim of mentoring its students as global leaders. To this end, students in their first two years are required to take intensive English courses. Upon entering the university, freshmen must take a placement test for English.

Students, although not necessarily involved directly in governance, are increasingly included as key stakeholders in the academic community. This is one of the key areas in which this young university is positioning itself within a larger system of existing research universities. It is becoming a catalyst for university reform in the immediate region, which means that it is important for university leaders to reach an informal consensus on matters such as fostering education innovation through shared governance.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

This research aimed to explore, through a case study, how a focus on innovation in higher education has affected the approach to shared governance, and, more specifically, the role of students in governance, at a public university in China. Specifically, the study traced the experiences of fifteen students over an academic year (2016-2017), exploring the ways in which the university leadership involved these students in governance. How innovation in higher education was affected on a practical level was also examined. Three specific research questions guided this research: 1. What program of student leadership development is being followed at the university? 2. What do the students experience as they participate in university governance? 3. How do studentsinfluence a university's approach to innovation in education?

V. METHOD

Allowing students to explore their own perceptions of leadership learning and their role in university governance guided the qualitative approach of this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). The specific nature of the Chinese research context indicated that a multi-layered qualitative approach (interviews, document study, field observation notes) would lead to triangulation and thick description (Stringer, 2008).

Fifteen students were interviewed three times during the academic year. The students, ten of whom were male and five female,reflecting the university's student gender ratio, were either in their third or fourth year of study, all of them being classed as academic high achievers. The document search examined literature concerning the university's approach to student leadership, such as official publications (university catalogue and handbook), website etc. Semi-structured in-depth interviews, each lasting between thirty minutes and an hour, allowed the participants to articulate their understanding of the student leadership and shared governance experience. Questions ranged from the participants' perception of what they thought the benefits and challenges of the student leadership experience were, to their advice to the university on shared governance. Each participant was assured of anonymity, to encourage candour in terms of answers given. It is common for students in Chinese universities to have English names, in addition to their Chinese names. For the purposes of anonymity, their English names are used when discussing the results.

The interviews were first recorded and then transcribed, with different parts of the text being assigned specific codes. Themes emerged as a result of this codification of data, which is essentially known as thematic content analysis (Silverman, 2015). Thematic fields were divided into core- and subthemes as units of analysis. In order to support or refute particular findings, and thus accuratelyexpress participants' views, relevant quotes were integrated into these themes. The literature reviewsupportedthe findings. By examining individual stories, narratives helped reflect participants' interpretations of their experiences (Boje, 2000).

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of the student participants interviewed consider themselves to be contributing to education innovation and believe that they are learning skills that are benefitting them academically and socially.

Leadership

Without exception, every participant believed they have learned a lot about leadership, although the training has not been in the guise of a formal program. Eric explains his journey towards leadership:

"When I was a freshman, I joined the Students' Association Union. After one year, I was elected to be the chair. My work includes managing clubs' registration and daily affairs, organizing large-scale club activities, communicating with universities and companies, and obtaining sponsorship from companies. Because there are many things relating to students, I have to meet many different people. I also learned how to cooperate with faculty, other universities and companies. This has taught me a lot about being a leader."

Maria has had a similar experience, which she recounts below:

"I've learned about leadership by having to speak on behalf of students, especially in the Students' Association Union. We work with the university management and faculty and they listen to our ideas and feedback. We deal with organizations outside the university and try and make things better for everyone on campus. This is hard sometimes, because people expect me to behave in different ways, maybe to be easy about everything, but sometimes I have to make tough decisions so things will happen, especially if we want to do things in new ways. I learned to rely on myself."

What Maria has expressed is that managing expectations is one of the most difficult facets of leadership. She has become more self-reliant as a result, though recognizing the importance of cultivating good relationships with management and faculty.

Liaising with faculty

If universities are to become key drivers in innovation, students will need to be part of such an endeavour. This will need to be set out in goals that are clearly-defined and communicated to all. One of the stated goals of the university is to combine academic endeavour with innovation. One of the ways it achieves this is quite unique in a Chinese context. As Mike, one of the participants, explains:

"This university is different to other universities in China in many ways. For me and my friends, one of the things we like a lot is that we have close access to research. We work with ourprofessors and many of us can publish research with them. This is good training for the future, because most of us will do a PhD after we graduate. We feel we are part of the university, that we are contributing to it in many ways."Lucy, a student in her final year, concurs:

"We have the opportunity to work closely with professors and also with companies here. I now have a patent, and many of my friends have a few patents. Some companies are interested in what we're doing, and there are some professors we work closely with who help us. This makes it easier to plan our futures. Friends of mine in other universities are envious because they want to be at the cutting edge of innovation too. Here the university makes us believe anything is possible."

This helps explain the increasing associations between higher education and industry, not only at the university in question, but, more generally, throughout China. Students develop an entrepreneurial spirit, which the university is effectively harnessing for innovation. It may also prove valuable for the future, especially where funding is concerned.

However, it should be noted that many participants expressed disappointment with the relationship with faculty. Logan exemplifies this:

"So many times we approach the professors to help us, to show us what we can do and to train us. They say they are too busy with research, to not bother them. This makes us unsure about who we can speak to. So often we have good ideas, but sometimes it seems that the people we should be closet to, the professors, are the ones who are far away from us."

Harry agrees with Logan, adding that:

"There are some professors here who are the world experts in their area, but they won't teach! Teaching is something they think isn't important. But how are we supposed to develop and improve if we don't learn from the best? We have ideas for new subjects, especially ones on leadership and entrepreneurship, innovation, but only some professors will listen. Those that do help are amazing, and we are very grateful to them, because we learn about being good researchers, about being organised, managing our time, and how to be the best."

Relationships with faculty are amongst the most meaningful relationships students will have when at university. Yet, in common with their colleagues in many higher education institutions, the pressure put on faculty to produce world-class research, which attracts additional funding for the institution in question, means that not enough value is being placed on curriculum or teaching, thus potentially depriving students of leadership and learning opportunities.

Funding

Universities must have adequate and continuous budgetsin order to be operationally sustainable. None of the participants have had to pay tuition fees over the course of their academic studies, due to generous local government funding. In an environment where massification of education will continue for the foreseeable future, this cannot be sustained in the long-term. Universities will be increasingly challenged to generate their own income in what is effectively becoming a market-oriented environment. The participants in this study exhibit a level of awareness about these tensions, with Marcus stating that:

"We are lucky in this university. I know some students don't understand that, but, because I'm in the student council, I know what it's like trying to raise money for an event or something. Students here don't need to worry about paying fees, which is great for those students who wouldn't be able to afford to come here if they didn't have that money, but how can the university continue doing this? They won't be able to do it forever. I think that, as the university grows, many students will be happy to pay fees, because a degree from this university is going to have value, just like a degree from Peking University of Tsinghua University, the top ones."

Skye agrees that students may offer a source of funding in the future, and is thinking about alumni also:

"Ok, this is a young university, and we just had the second graduation ceremony. What about an alumni association? We will all want to stay in touch with each other and with the university where we are happy. This could help the university in the future. We could offer internships to students when we have high positions in companies and develop a network that will help the university continue to be different. We'd mentor the students in the same way that some people have been our mentors."

The participants see the need to locate revenue sources for the future, if the university is to continue to innovate in higher education. With academic programs that are of high quality, links with industry and potential donors in the form of alumni, the university can continue to innovate, with income sources that are increasingly diversified.

All of this serves to create an institutional culture where the need to be financially viable is emphasised, yet, so, too, is the need to give back to society.

Institutional culture

The institutional culture at the university in this study is one where a Confucian tradition prevails, where with concern for the family and social cohesion being paramount. This is something the university leadership works to inculcate in all members of the university community, and students have contributed in no small way to this culture. All of the participants in this study have contributed to society through charity endeavours and volunteerism. Diana explains the '4pm classroom for kids':

"This is something organised by the students at the university. At around 4pm on schooldays, we go to the local primary school and teach about 20 kids in each class. We do this because these kids' parents come from other cities to work here. They usually get off work late because they work long hours. So we teach the kids for free, to help them until their parents are finished work."

Approximately ten percent of the university's student population is involved in the '4pmclassroom for kids'. This is a wonderful example of community service in action, yet is just one example of what the university students do. Many become involved in sports or other events, to raise money for various worthwhile causes, others organize regular blood donation drives, and some, like Shaun, are involved in the 'letters to kids' campaign:

"We write letters to left-at home kids from rural areas, to try to make them feel they are cared about. Many of them don't have much in their lives – many are very poor, others live with their grandparents because their parents are working in the cities. We want these kids to feel that they can have hope for the future. Sometimes they reply to our letters, and then we can write back again, which helps build relationships. It's important that we understand we are lucky and that we remember others do not have the same chances we do."

What we see from this is that innovation in education does not only focus on the academic and financial, but also on the social aspects of society. Some of the students volunteer to visit remote rural areas in the summer, or to work in camps where rural children are brought to urban locations. These students are learning about all aspects of leadership,and are supported by the university leadership in their altruistic activities. The university leadership is also learning from this, as it continually refines its student recruitment strategies.

Recruitment

For auniversity to continue to innovate, and to ensure that good governance prevails, as well as quality education, attention needs to be paid not only to recruitment of quality faculty and staff, but also to recruitment of the best students. The question needs to be asked as to the kinds of talents higher education should nurture. Cindy believes that students entering the university are more talented than before:

"I can see a difference in the freshmen this year. Many of them seem to be strong in Math and Science, and this is a good thing. Because more people now know about our university, standards can become higher, are becoming higher. We see this with professors too. For example, there is a famous professor here now, who used

to work in Peking University. All the students want to learn from him, because people think he's one of the best professors in China. This is good for the older students, and good for the future, because there will be more competition to come here, and our degree will be a very good one to have in the future. People will say 'You are from (name of institution), so you must be excellent' and this will help everyone."

Phillip also sees a difference in the profile of those targeted by recent recruitment efforts, be they faculty, staff or students:

"There are more foreigners here now, professors, managers and students. This is good for the university, because we will know more about how things work in other countries. We will become better too. Some of the professors and teachers are great – they're doing interesting things, and we want to learn more and more from them. This will make more students want to join the university. We've got some good ideas about getting the best students to join, and we'll help the management with this."

Thus, a model of shared university governance emerges, based on the themes revealed in this case study, where liaising with faculty, funding, institutional culture and recruitment are all interdependent and all foster and nurture innovation in higher education.

VII.   RECOMMENDATIONS

The global economic crisis of the early twenty-first century has had a significant effect on universities globally. China has weathered the economic storm quite well, due to sustained government funding, and their universities are, to some extent, in better financial shape than their Western counterparts. Now universities need to consolidate their gains, in order to be truly innovative in both the local and international contexts.

Internationalization has both advantages and disadvantages. The global academic marketplace for professors and students means that the best students and staff members can be attracted away. Overreliance on a small number of long-established international journals for promotion and research criteria may place professors in Chinese research universities at a disadvantage. To all intents and purposes, they are on the periphery. Globalization, on the other hand, tends to favour universities at the centre over others, which means thatscience and learning are more prized in a Western context. This is evidenced by the fact that over eighty percent of the university's graduates travel abroad to pursue postgraduate study, as well as by the fact that the vast majority of professors in the university have worked abroad before recently returning to China, usually because of financial incentives, primarily research funding.

Perhaps instead, the university could consider the merits of more bilingual programs, summer schools, exchange students, faculty exchange, dual degree programs. This would help the university and Chinese universities in general, moving from what is basically an import model (importing education ideas and reforms) to what could be an export model (dual degree programs would see more international students come to China as part of their studies).

The university needs to continue to attract the best professors, but also needs toplace increased emphasis on attracting the best students. For example, it can employ a typical "carrot and stick" approach, in common with many other institutions. One way of doing this is by extending financial incentives to faculty members willing to develop a program to enhance students' learning or leadership. The university also has introduced student course evaluations and made the results accessible to students. This was a necessary step, as many universities know that faculty are often more interested in research than teaching. What this study shows is that interaction with faculty members is considered by students to be one of the main factors in their university development.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

The university in this study is fortunate in that it has been specifically tasked with acting as a catalyst for education innovation. System change is inevitable in today's fast-paced education environment, yet long-established traditions in older universities make change more difficult. Even within the context of a new university, there are many who have a background in older, more traditional universities, so resistance to change still needs to be overcome. A newer university can act as a catalyst for innovation in education, especially if it takes into account the student dimension.

The university leadership and students are developing what is, in essence, a reciprocal relationship leading to innovation, shared governance and sustainable change.What has emerged is that mentor role models are central to student leadership development, and, in turn, the student dimension is key to both university governance and innovation.

Student leaders in this case study display a commitment to civic engagement. This study is encouraging to proponents of student involvement in university governance, demonstrating that a combination of explicit (classroom curriculum, leadership programs) and implicit (mentoring opportunities) leadership instruction will promote personal and academic growth in student leaders, thus paving the way for innovation in higher education.

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