Lessons Chinese Universities might learn from UK Mass Higher Education in Their Transition from Elite to Mass System of Higher Education

Fuqiang Zhou

Abstract: This article focuses on some key themes and issues recurrent in UK higher education in the last two decades so that Chinese universities might get some experiences from UK mass higher education. It examines managing change, managerialism, government control, and students' position, teachers' response toward the change, knowledge transfer and internationalization in UK higher education respectively. The author also briefly presents the present characteristics of Chinese higher education. The concluding thought is that to achieve successful transformation from elite to mass system of higher education, Chinese universities can benefit a lot from UK mass higher education with emphasizing Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: mass higher education; elite education; Chinese universities

Introduction

The UK higher education system has undergone a major transformation over the past twenty years, from a system that catered for an elite group of entrants as recently as the early 1980s to one that now aims to provide tertiary education to half the population of 18-30 year olds (Byner et al., 2002). Clarke (2003) affirms that in the early 1960's only 6 per cent of under-21s went to university, whereas today around 43 per cent of 18-30 year olds in England enter higher education. According to Martin Trow's taxonomy, UK higher education is approaching to its universal system (age participation above 50%), whereas Chinese higher education is just beginning its mass higher education system (age participation over 21% in 2005). UK universities have accumulated rich experiences of mass higher education over the last two decades. On the basis of their reading of all available information, from cross-cohort comparisons between national surveys of graduate career paths to detailed analysis of what graduates told them, Elias and Purcell (2004) conclude that the outcome of UK higher education expansion at the end of the 20th century was largely positive. Judging from the rankings of world universities 2004, UK enjoys the second best position in its higher education after the United States.

Chinese higher education has expanded very quickly over the past 20 years. The enrollment of higher education institutions in China rose from about 1 million in early 1980s to over 23 million in 2005. To achieve the successful transformation from the elite to the mass system of higher education, Chi-
Chinese universities might learn from the practice of UK mass higher education. In this paper, I introduce some common themes essential to English mass higher education, including managing change, managerialism and government control. And then I focus on the managing experiences of UK universities during mass higher education period. I also emphasize the importance of developing Chinese characteristics of mass higher education based on the lessons learnt from UK mass higher education.

**Essential themes of UK mass higher education**

1. Managing change in UK mass higher education

What impresses me most about UK mass higher education in the past two decades is its' emphasis on managing change. Most of the literature I have read about UK higher education and most of the lectures I had in the School of Education and Continuing Studies in the University of Portsmouth are about managing change or related to managing change. Managing change is key words in my understanding of the transformation from elite to mass system of higher education in UK. Higher education institutions are now subject to an unprecedented level of external scrutiny; the demands made of them have expanded, and expectations have changed. HEIs inhabit a more competitive world, where resources have become scarcer and where the impact technology has never been so great or so unpredictable (Ford et al, 1996). According to Ford et al there are several aspects that make managing change in higher education essential. First is massification of UK higher education. In a very short space of time higher education has changed from an elite system to one of mass participation, with over 40 per cent of 18-year-old school leavers entering higher education. This necessitates for quick and fundamental change. In order to gain the improvements in efficiency and effectiveness that massification demands, most HEIs are adjusting their organizational structures, exploring new learning methods, using new delivery methods enhanced by information and communications technology, finding new partnerships and collaborations. Second is competition and control. Competition is changing the face of UK higher education and increasing the diversity of the system. To succeed in the competition for funding for competitive advantage, there has been a shift away from discipline-focused degrees, in which subjects are studied for their own sake, towards acquisition of the kinds of skills that can be directly used in employment. The linking of funding to the outcome of the teaching and research also causes pressures for change. Changing students profile and the provision of learning resources also caused fundamental change in higher education. Watson (1996) points out that UK HEIs are rich and complex environments. He further states that much of that richness and complexity has arisen from their ready acceptance of certain kinds of change: change as it affects the development of disciplinary and interdisciplinary paradigms; change as individuals and groups absorb and reflect upon new discoveries; and change as the academic community responds to its host society.

Many cases show that the implementation of change in HEIs is difficult and challenging. According to Fullan (1991) there is always a danger that implementation of change might become assimilation into existing practice. Martin (1999) expresses her experience in a seminar where a colleague made a plea for academic staff to stand firm and resist all further changes in academic work. She admits that in stressful times it is common for people to adopt extreme positions and become defensive rather than cooperative. As Bennet et al (1992) suggest that change is about altering both practice and organization and individuals' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. So it is essential to make change a learning experience and involve individuals into the whole process of change. Pennington (2003) suggests that proposed changes can be placed along two scales: radical - incremental and core - peripheral. Plotting the character of a proposed change along these scales can provide a sense of how difficult the introduction of any particular initiative might be and how much 'dis-
turbance' to the status quo it might generate. Radical changes to an institution's or department's core business will normally generate high levels of disturbance; incremental changes to peripheral activities are often considered to be unexceptional and can be accommodated as a matter of course, especially if the group involved has a successful past record of continuous improvement. Pennington notes that, as a general rule, professionals and technical staff will tend to resist changes which are perceived to threaten their core values and practices, and which have a negative impact on individuals and which diminish group autonomy.

2. Managerialism in UK Mass higher education

The term 'managerialism' is generally used to refer to the adoption by public sector organizations of organizational forms, technologies, management practices and values more commonly found in the private business sector. In the context of significant changes in their operating environments and pressures to increase their efficiency and public accountability, UK HEIs have been urged to emphasize management to ensure the effective, efficient and economical management of their limited resources. The extent of the development and penetration of managerialism into education management can be traced through educational legislation from the middle years of the conservative New Right administrations of Margaret Thatcher and John Major (Cowan and Wright, 1989). Managerialism in UK mass Higher education is generally very controversial. To maintain and increase the competitive advantage, the managing body of HEIs generally welcomes and tries to emphasize it whereas the academic staffs are very critical of it. Managerialism is likely to place considerable pressure on roles and individuals, especially where the tensions between the logic of managerial control and the conventions of professional autonomy become especially acute. Clarke & Newman suggest that the cultural and performance aspects which managerialism attempts to manipulate, are themselves often in tension (Clarke & Newman, 1997a).

The growth of managerialism in higher education has been coupled with a growing body of critical literature which attempts to throw light on this issue (Willmott, 1995; Mok, 1997; Giroux, 1999; Simkins, 2000; Meyer, 2002; O'Brien and Down, 2002). In her inaugural lecture, Clegg (2001), made reference to the "realities of mass education", and the challenges of surviving in these new realities where the issues of power and insecurity are all too common. Ritzer's (1996) critique underlines the impact of "McDonaldisation" on education, with the emphasis on standardization and control in higher education. Ritser further argues that people have certain responsibilities and must act in accord with rules, written regulations, and means of compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions. Wagner (2001) informs that more and more measures of performance serve to control and coerce academics. In the view of Willmott (1995), constituting the student as customer reifies the view that the university has become part of the corporate agenda that has transformed the degree into a commodity; the role of the academic is that of a service provider who treats the student as a customer. Roger Waterhouse, Vice-Chancellor of University of Derby (Waterhouse, 2002) expresses the view that higher education in UK is in fact serving a customer - the student - embracing the inherent characteristics of other service-related industries. According to Rhoades (1998, p. 2), social relations on campus are increasingly corporatized, as faculty find their time, work and the products of their labour increasingly controlled by managers, who have extended their discretion at the expense of professional autonomy, and arguably of the public interest. Whereas Ozga (1998) suggests that managerialism in education simulates the competitive market through competition for funds, through productivity incentives, performance indicators, contract-based planning and employment and strong central control accompanied by devolved responsibility.

3. Government controls in higher education

Maassen (2000) points out that the economic crisis of the late 1970s, early 1980s led to a growing interest on the government side in the economic role
of higher education. British government realized that the decline in traditional manufacturing and the advent of an economy based on continuous technological change has placed a premium on the knowledge and skills that are found and developed within higher education. Universities are central to the development of the UK as a prosperous and competitive knowledge-based economy. Education secretary, Charles Clarke, says universities are: 'Critical to Britain's ability to master a fast changing world'. It is now 'steered' through the simultaneous centralization of content and direction, and the decentralization and devolution of responsibility to individual institutions.

Education experiences these centralizing forces with other services in 'the managerial state' (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Government policies designed to significantly increase the numbers of students in higher education and diversify the social intake into universities are also supporting growth in the sector. During the last two decades, especially after Labor came to power in 1997, UK higher education sector is being urged to 'modernize', 'adapt', 'diversify', 'marketize', and is expected to become 'entrepreneurial', 'competitive', more 'efficient' and more 'effective', more 'service oriented', and more 'socially relevant'.

It is important to consider the nature of the education/economy linkage in terms of the current dominance of the economic agenda which has gathered strength in UK since 1997. Education is a policy preoccupation of the new government, which seeks to create "a world-class system for economic competitiveness" (Barber, 1997). The government has responsibilities for system-wide matters. It is responsible for the legislation which controls the operation of the whole system. The government develops a policy for higher education how much higher education that should be and what it aims or rejects should be related as a whole. The government decides how much money it can provide as a subsidy to the university system. But the government is forbidden by law from interfering with the individual universities. It may not tell any universities how to deal with academic affairs, how to deal with the students it admits, or how to deal with of appoints to professors. Each university makes these decisions. But the universities are constrained by a lot of limitations imposed of all. What happened is the government gives the total sum of money to funding councils to subsidize the universities.

To maintain the overall quality along with the rapid student expansion, the government established Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1997. The Government's decision to charge the newly created funding councils with the responsibility to introduce subject-based QA injected increased tension into the relations between the universities and the funding council, at a time when the financial screws were being further tightened every year. This tension made the operation of the QA process more difficult and time-consuming. The QA process in England serves three fundamental purposes: secure value for public investment and to demonstrate public accountability for this investment; encourage improvements in higher education and provide effective and accessible public information on the quality of the education for which the HEFCE provides funding. Accordingly, many universities have established quality assurance units, in response to the arrival of QA, that have promoted the improvement of quality across their institutions. But Floud (2001) argues that higher education wastes money on quality assessments that could be better spent. According to him, the £250 million annual cost of quality control, audit, accountability and research assessment systems in English higher education is equal to the fees for 250,000 students; the cost of five universities; the pay of 10,000 lecturers. And he predicts that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland spend proportionately the same.

The relationship between government and HEIs is always controversial. It is important to keep a balance between government involvement and higher education autonomy. Maassen (2000) recommends that in order for government to ensure that policy processes are more effective it should acknowledge that the role of politics is to design, adapt, and monitor the 'framework' conditions within which HEIs op-
erate. He believes that appropriate HEIs professionals should be deliberately involved in policy making and higher education institutions should be expected to operate autonomously in implementing policies and realizing higher education goals within the agreed framework. He warns that politics should not interfere in the detailed operation of HEIs. Governments should develop more effective monitoring structures for evaluating and analyzing the ways in which higher education policies are handled in practice.

Managing issues of UK HEIs during mass higher education

1. Student as the empowered consumer

Increasingly, students in UK HEIs are becoming more focused on the issue of the student as a 'consumer' of educational services. Reasons for this include the imposition of fees, the increase in litigation and willingness to go to court, pressure on students to get a good result in as short a timescale as possible and the impact of codes of practice and benchmarking. The growing trends of 'customer sovereignty' and increased education on student rights and entitlements means that any lecturer needs to know what their 'customers' want and need. In addition to the consumer pressure from students, academics face other pressures that may increase the need for student feedback and evaluation. As an aspect of marketing, brochures and Internet web pages are well designed to attract potential students. HEIs pay much attention to the characteristics of the students such as their personal goals, abilities, needs, interests and values. The institutional environment, including the physical, academic, social and psychological variables, is also emphasized to fit for students' need. The outcomes resulting from the interaction of the student with the environment are closely examined. As this will have an impact on the student's academic achievement, satisfaction and persistence within the institution. But along with rapid expansion and the reduction in unit cost campuses are becoming more and more crowded and class size is getting larger. Individual tutored time is getting less. Students' complaints are common in many universities.

2. Professional autonomy versus managerial control

Researches have shown the majority of the academic and teaching staff in UK HEIs is complying with the externally imposed managerial initiatives upon their profession (Martin, 1999; Walker, 2001). But they have not accepted these constraints unquestioningly. They have adapted their ways of working to correspond to the requirements of a managerialist system. The teachers' actions and responses to managerialism both reproduce and transform the structures. Longer serving teachers feel they have experienced a loss of professional autonomy. Despite this they have attempted to adapt their ways of working to 'fit' with management requirements. They do not appear to necessarily reject the need for increased planning and better management and organization in HEIs. However, it is the way in which managerial mechanisms have been introduced which is problematic. Teachers are compliant with and, to a large extent, agree with the eventual goal of improving teaching and learning in education. However, from a professional point of view, the lack of real consultation in the process of change and its top-down managerialist nature are contested. The movement towards a managerial culture in education has resulted in various outcomes for these teachers. Accommodating the changes has caused high levels of anxiety and demoralization among staff. The intensification of workload has resulted in feelings of ambivalence towards the occupation, constant weariness with working long hours, and a sense of inadequacy and personal dissatisfaction with their own performance. While teachers endeavor to satisfy the demands of increased assessment, administration and accountability there is an apparent decrease in the service to their students as a consequence. This in turn generates anxiety, stress and guilt for teachers who perceive that their teaching is impeded while also less effective and responsive. Martin (1999) concludes that the ways of working are changing and we do have to respond.

3. Knowledge transfer versus academic freedom
Higher education in the UK generates over £30 billion for the economy and supports more than half a million jobs. Universities can play a bigger role in creating jobs and prosperity. Knowledge and skill transfer between business and higher education is of great importance in English regional economies. Universities have a role in fostering the establishment and growth of new companies; in working with existing companies both on the application of the latest technology and the successful application of more tried and tested technologies; and in working with business to develop the skills of the workforce at technical and professional levels. At their best, these links should be highly interactive, with each partner well aware of what the other can offer, and of what their needs are (DFes, 2003). The Government is increasing the size of the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) from 2004-05 - with £80 million available in 2004-05, and £90 million in 2005-06 - and at the same time rationalizing the different schemes (including Science Enterprise Centers and University Challenge) to promote knowledge transfer and innovation. But according to Palfreyman (2002) there is tension between seeking research contracts from industry and the academic freedom to publish research findings in UK HEIs. Though the strong research base in the UK takes advantage of research conducted elsewhere and provides the expertise to keep up with international developments. HEIs must realize the fierce competition against the USA, Japan, Canada, and other nations that are significantly increasing their investment in research. It is generally felt that research in social science is neglected by the government. It does not think that research in social science is important. It does not think that research in humanities is important. This is a very foolish attitude because these are cheap research subjects. It doesn't cost very much money to do research in these areas. So it is why the government will be not willing to let professors to pursue research at high level in these areas, according to a professor I acquainted.

4. Internationalization of UK mass higher education

As international students are seen by UK HEIs as adding both moral and cash value to them, most HEIs have international offices that recruit international students through a variety of means. Many staff at all levels believe and argue that internationalization is good in its own right, and institutional mission statements reflect their values. They point to the educational benefits that students and academics from other cultures and systems can bring to the institution, broadening its knowledge base, increasing the breadth and reputation of its research and enriching the curriculum. The presence of international students and academics is also seen to widen the cultural horizons of home students and staff, as well as the wider community, promoting international understanding and cross cultural sensitivity (Bruch & Barty, 1998). In 2002/3, there were 275,275 international students in UK HEIs (UKCOSA: HE statistics) equaling to the students number of 30 intermediate-size universities and an increase of more than 80 per cent since 1995/6. Along with the fast expansion of students coming to UK, Many HEIs are developing partnerships with foreign institutions to mutual benefit of all parties. Quality concerns are always in the forefront whether the education is provided at campuses in the UK, at offshore campuses of UK institutions, through collaborative links with institutions in other countries, or by distance learning relying on the Internet, video conferencing or other electric media. Baty (2005) writes that Luton University offered places to overseas students who lacked minimum entry requirements, its quality chief warned last year as the university was starting a scheme to delegate overseas admissions decisions to commercial partners. Teachers in different universities have similar complaints that some international students can't understand English lectures, the reason they were accepted only because they could pay their tuitions. HEIs must stick to basic standards of education quality even if funding issue alone could encourage institutions to focus on their international constituency as emphasized by Bruch and Barty.

UK higher education is, by OECD norms, highly
productive, achieving a quality university experience for its students despite under-funding. It relies on over-worked and under-paid committed staff, and on student-consumers tolerant of over-crowding. It deserves better than to be meddled into mediocrity by bumbling bureaucrats and passed-by politicians. It needs a robust academic profession vigorous in defending rigorous standards for teaching and research; and a profession able to define, demand and justify academic freedom, and also be crystal clear on just what is a university and its value to society. It remains to be seen whether elite UK HEIs will ever have the courage to escape being part of the last nationalized industry, and take responsibility for protecting academic quality in the teaching of undergraduates, for maintaining the brand image of UK HE, and also for their own strategic and financial destiny (David Palfreyman, 2002).

**Higher education with Chinese characteristics**

The experiences of UK mass higher education are precious deposits full of diversity and implications. There are thousands of Chinese visiting scholars as well as students every year staying in different UK universities benefiting from the experiences and wisdom. They learn in order to develop Chinese higher education with Chinese characteristics.

In the last two decades, aware of development opportunities brought about in the era of knowledge, China has formulated the concept of "Human resources are the No.1 resources" and the strategy of "Revitalizing the nation by developing science, technology and education" and is forcefully advocating ideas and system innovations in higher education in order to promote the rapid development of higher education. All these government endeavors aim to transform China from a heavy-populated country to a strong one with notable human resources and to meet the challenges within the context of economic globalization and the rapid development of science and technology. China's ultimate objective is to make the Chinese nation thrive greatly.

Since 1990s, China's higher education achieved a new developmental period. To quicken the process of transition from elite to mass system of higher education, Chinese government successively issued a series of laws and regulations and documents, e.g. China's Higher Education Reform and Development Outline (1993), Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China (1998), Action Scheme for Invigorating Education Towards the 21st Century (1998) etc.. The government is thoroughly implementing the strategy of giving priority to the development of education, carrying out the strategy of "Revisiting the Nation by Developing Science, Technology and Education", using the developmental experiences of international higher education for reference, deepening higher education's reform in system and accelerating the developmental pace of higher education. In May 1999, the Chinese government made a great decision to enlarge further the enrollment scale in higher education. Since then, the massification of China's higher education stepped fast. Through six years' enlargement in enrollment, the number of students receiving higher education in China's HEIs amounts to 23 million in 2005. The gross enrollment rate of higher education has increased from 9.1% to 21%. China begins to step into the threshold of higher education massification. China has become the largest country surpassing America in world higher education. Such developmental pace is unprecedented.

Chinese higher education developed fast not without problems. The major problem is mainly too much government-driven. HEIs have too limited autonomy. In market economy, it is the market and supply, not the governmental plan, play the fundamental role in resource allocation and utilization. The labor market plays the fundamental role in human resource development and allocation. In such a system, higher education institutions need to gear their programs to meet the human resource needs of the labor market. This does not mean that all teaching and research should be shaped by market force, but that the human resource needs of the socioeconomic development as
signaled by labor market supply and demand will be of primary importance to universities. Thus Chinese higher education system, which used to be part of the centrally planned economy must be reformed (Min, 2002).

Scott (1995) is reasonable in stating that UK higher education has become a mass system in its public structures, but remains an elite one in its private instincts. With its over 45 per cent age group in HEIs, the total number of students is about 2 million. Whereas in China in 2005 the total number of students is about 23 million with 21 per cent age group in HEIs. If UK can afford elite instincts within mass higher education context, China must explore its unique way of mass higher education because of the heavy population burden (1.3 billion). Besides the themes and issues mentioned above about UK higher education, Chinese HEIs must try every possible way to create suitable models and frameworks in its process of developing mass system higher education.

Concluding comments

According to Palfreyman (2002) UK higher education is highly productive, achieving a quality university experience for its students despite under-funding. Clarke (2003) claims that British universities are a great success story. The reason why UK higher education is successful is that it emphasized managing change so that there was successful transformation from elite to mass system of higher education. Managerialism, even though controversial, accepted by the majority of the HEIs and they valued the feedback of students who are regarded as empowered consumers. Teaching quality was maintained with close government involvement by funding and constant quality assurance despite the committed staff was over-worked and under-paid. Because of the reputation of UK higher education and also because of the advantage of English language, HEIs benefit by having large number of international students studying in UK.

UK higher education succeeded not without problems. Such as under-funding, too heavy government control, not enough competition and problem with fair access. Chinese higher education, though with quick expansion, exceeded UK in terms of students' number, as far as overall competitive edge is concerned, is still far behind UK higher education. There are 29 universities in UK in the top 200 in the world, whereas there are only 10 Chinese universities in the top 200 still including 3 in Hong Kong and 1 in Taiwan (Times Higher, 2004). In the context of globalization, it is essential for Chinese higher education to integrate into the framework of globalization at the same time stick to Chinese localization.

References


[22] Mok, K., (1997) " The cost of managerialism: the implications for the 'McDonaldisation' of higher education in Hong Kong", Public and Social Administration Working Paper Series, No. 6, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.


[34] The Times Higher Education Supplement, RANKINGS NOVEMBER, 5 2004.


