

International Universities in China and Uzbekistan: The Quest for Legitimacy

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TransNational Education (TNE) or Cross-border Higher Education has become a salient phenomenon in the internationalization of higher education worldwide. The development and rise of International Universities (IUs) are a significant mode of TNE provisions cross-border. The objective of this paper is to understand the legitimacy of such IUs in the context of dominant Centrally Controlled countries such as China and Uzbekistan. Countries that have had or have a strong Centrally planned and controlled Higher Education sector and one that is facing strong global competition and internal stress factors in coping with the transitional changes to a global labour market.

This paper addresses the following questions:

- What are the important legitimacy factors for international universities (IUs) in China and Uzbekistan?
- What strategies do international universities use to gain legitimacy (social acceptance and support) from different stakeholders in these two countries?

Theoretical Framework:

This study combines Scott (1995)'s institutional theory and Suchman's (1995) legitimacy definition to understand legitimacy factors for IUs in China and Uzbekistan, as well as to explore the strategies IUs use to gain legitimacy in these two countries.

Institutional theory has been widely used to understand organizations and organizational change. Scott (1995) provides a definition of institutions:

Institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Institutions are transported by various carriers---cultures, structures, and routines---and they operate at multiple levels of jurisdiction. (p.33)

Institutions confine organizations' behaviour and practices. Scott (1995, 2001) suggests using three pillars of institutions as an analytical framework to understand the adoption of structures, practices and beliefs that conform to normative expectations for legitimacy (Wilkins, 2011). Each of the three pillars provides a basis for legitimacy. Institutionalists view legitimacy not as a commodity to be possessed or exchanged, but "a condition reflecting cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws" (p.45, Scott, 1995).

These three pillars include:

- **Regulatory:** the organizations need to conform to the regulations, laws, and rules, usually by coercion, to build their legitimacy from the government. The regulatory pillar is legally sanctioned;
- **Normative:** the normative pillar is morally governed. It concerns with the appropriateness of an organization's practices and activities. Organizations build their legitimacy through certification and accreditation;
- **Cognitive:** the cognitive pillar emphasizes "the "taken for grantedness" of a social form or practice" (p.47, Scott, 1995). It stresses that this form of legitimacy comes from adopting an orthodox structure or identity in order to relate to a specific situation. It achieves prevalence or isomorphism due to the support of culture and being viewed as the correct way to do things.

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Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (p.574). Organizations seek legitimacy for the purpose of stability and the comprehensibility of organizational activities (continuity), and organizations being “more meaningful, more predictable, and more trustworthy” (p.575, Suchman, 1995). Some organizations seek passive support from constituencies just to avoid questioning, and only need to “make sense”. Other organizations seek active support to mobilize affirmative commitments by their constituencies.

Suchman classifies legitimacy into three types: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. Pragmatic legitimacy refers to the self-interests of an organization’s most immediate audiences and stakeholders. There are three subtypes within pragmatic legitimacy: 1) Exchange legitimacy: constituents’ support for an organizational policy based on that policy’s expected value to them; 2) Influence legitimacy: constituents’ support for the organization because it is responsive to their larger interests, rather than providing them with specific favorable exchanges; and 3) Dispositional legitimacy: constituents view the organizations as individuals, and are likely to confer legitimacy to those organizations that “have our best interests at heart”, are “decent”, and “wise”. Moral legitimacy is more concerned with whether the activity conducted by an organization is “the right thing to do”. More specifically, moral legitimacy is about whether the activity effectively promotes societal welfare, as defined by the audience’s socially constructed value system. Moral legitimacy involves evaluations of outputs and consequences, techniques and procedures, and categories and structure. Suchman’s moral legitimacy is very close to Scott’s normative pillar of institutions. Cognitive legitimacy may involve either affirmative backing for an organization or mere acceptance of the organization as necessary or inevitable based on some take-for-granted cultural account.

Methodology

Three institutions from China and one institution from Uzbekistan were selected as case studies for this research. These three Chinese institutions represent different categories of international universities: Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University (Suzhou), an independent institution with legal person status that does not require reasonable return, partners with government and operates for more than five years; New York University, an independent institution with legal person status that does not require reasonable return, partners with government, and operates for less than five years; and University of Nottingham Ningbo, an independent institution with legal person status, partners with a private higher education institution and business in China. The Uzbekistan institution is Westminster International Universities in Tashkent (WIUT), which was chosen because it is representative of such institutions in Uzbekistan. In addition, one of the authors of this paper is one of the key people of WIUT’s establishment and development. This following section focuses on data collection for Chinese institutions.

Data Sources

Robert Yin (2014) suggests six major forms of evidence sources for doing cases studies: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation and physical artifacts. Yin (2014) states that no single source has a complete advantage over all the others and they are highly complementary. A good case study utilizes as many sources as possible. For the cases in China, we use documentation and interviews as the major sources of evidence. For Uzbekistan case, the author will mainly share his practices in pursuing legitimacy.

Documentation: Websites, news clippings, and reports will be collected. The most important function of documentary evidence is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources.

Interviews: In this study, interviews will include university administrators and staff, students, employers, and academic experts. Focus group interviews will be conducted with students. Students are recruited on a voluntary basis. Each interview will last between 20 minutes and 1.5 hours.

Purposeful sampling will be used to identify interview subjects. First, university websites and news and reports will be used to identify those who were primarily involved in the establishment of each

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institution. Administrators and faculty will be identified from the website for interviews too. Additional interviews will be conducted based on their recommendations.

However, I need to be very cautious about what the administrators say about their institution. They might have a view to promote, or they might be self-serving. In order to minimize the negative effects caused by this, I will: 1) use my intuition and judgment carefully during the interviews; 2) ask the interviewees at X institution about Y institution; and 3) conduct interviews with students and teachers at these institutions.

Focus groups of students will be selected randomly at these institutions. These focus groups will be a mix of students at different levels, for instance, a good mix of freshmen, juniors, seniors and graduate students. Employers' information will be obtained from interviews with career offices at these institutions. The human resource department of these employers will be contacted for the interviews. Employers from these areas but that do not employ students from these institutions will also be interviewed to understand their perspectives about the graduates from such institutions.

Academic experts will be identified through two conference attendee lists. The first conference is The Inaugural Meeting & First Council Meeting of Sino-Foreign Cooperative University Union/ The Sino-Foreign Cooperative University Presidents Forum 2014 and International University Leaders Symposium (Shenzhen), which was held at Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University on June 4, 2014. The second conference is The 5th Annual Conference on Chinese-foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, held between November 8-11 in Shenzhen, China. Other experts who publish in China in this field will be contacted and interviewed.

Preliminary Results

Our research indicates that state and market are the most important legitimacy conferrers in both China and Uzbekistan. The government bodies at different levels welcome this new type of institutions for various reasons. For the central government, this new model of higher education institutions is mainly considered as one way to explore higher education reform in its country. The provincial government welcomes international universities because they can improve the internationalization of its higher education system, which will lead to higher prestige and reputation within the nation and abroad. The local government has the strongest motivation to develop international universities because IUs not only will improve its reputation, but also boost its economy by cultivating a skilled workforce. Therefore, IUs will improve the quality of life in tis area. Some other reasons might include less violence, better environment, et cetera.

In addition to state being the biggest legitimacy conferrer, market is another important factor. Even though the home institution and partner institution (in the China case) may carry some legitimacy over to the new institutions, they still face the "liability of newness" (Freeman et al., 1983) and "the liability of foreignness" (Zaheer & Mosakowski, 1997). They have to work hard to seek acceptance and support from parents and students, and employers.

The international universities gain legitimacy by conforming to the environment. The national context in both Uzbekistan and China is that the governments are exploring reforms in higher education sector. International universities are one way to test out new models in higher education institutions. These IUs conforms to this environment and label themselves as pioneers in higher education reform. Another way to gain legitimacy is to conform to the norms and culture in the society. In China, being low-profile and humble is much appreciated, as the saying goes "The gun shoots the birds that takes the lead". Some institutions keep quiet about themselves in order to survive and develop.

The major strategy the IUs use to gain legitimacy in these countries is to create the environment. This might be because the legal framework in Uzbekistan and China is very abstract, which gives the institutions much space to interpret the legal framework on their own. Therefore, the senior managers of the universities usually lobby the central government to provide them more support to gain regulative legitimacy.

Forging alliances is another way for the international universities to create the environment beneficial for their survival and development. By forging the alliances, they can share their resources, practices, and challenges they encounter. Meanwhile, they garner more media attention by forging alliances, and use the media to create the environment suitable for them.

Instead of seeking isomorphism as the legitimacy framework suggests, these international universities emphasize their uniqueness from traditional higher education institutions, as well as among

themselves. For instance, Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University stresses their five star model of educating students and their networking organizational structure. NYU Shanghai highlights the importance of the candidate weekend and the mutual fit between NYU Shanghai and prospective students.

Study Significance:

This research is significant in three aspects: 1) to fill a research gap on the development of international universities, a new phenomenon in cross-border higher education; 2) to extend legitimacy theory to higher education in an international environment, especially to countries that are seldom studied in the literature; and 3) to illuminate practices of international universities gaining legitimacy in the context of authoritarian countries.

Legitimacy is one of the oldest problems in the intellectual history of Western civilization. It has been used and analyzed in philosophy, political science, sociology, and psychology (Zelditch, 2001). Recently, legitimacy has been broadly studied in understanding organizations, such as businesses, hospitals, and restaurants and even nonprofit organizations in China (Du, 2010; Du & Zhang, 2009; Wang et al, 2011; Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2001; Alstrom et al., 2008; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Zeng et al., 2009; Li, et al., 2012). However, there are few studies of the legitimacy of educational institutions. Slantcheva and Levy (2007) edited a book titled *Private Higher Education in Post-Communist Europe: in Search of Legitimacy* is one of the few books that study legitimacy issues pertinent to higher education, and perhaps the only one with a focus outside the United States. Only a few examples of Chinese-language literature on legitimacy in higher education have been found. Zhang and Zhu (2011) studied how higher education institutions tend to look the same (i.e., education institutional isomorphism), using the lens of neo-institutionalism. Qi (2012) studied the legitimacy issues related to the new ventures created by higher education institutions. So far little research has been done in English regarding cross-border higher education or international universities in Uzbekistan. In addition, there is no empirical research that has been conducted on how international universities have gained legitimacy in host countries worldwide. My study will fill this gap.

This study will be useful to scholars and experts in both of Chinese and Uzbekistan higher education. Since international university is a new phenomenon, it is critical to understand its nature, the role it plays in the higher education sector in these two countries, and its functions. It will provide policy makers with valid evidence to make future policies.

In addition to the contribution to cross-border higher education and legitimacy, our research also has potential practical implications. To date, forty-two such cross-border institutions have been closed down, which in some cases incurred significant costs as well as reputational damage. For instance, the withdrawal of the University of New South Wales in 2007 from Singapore after only 2 months in operation resulted in a loss of US \$38 million to the university (Becker, 2009). Suffolk University suffered a loss of US \$10 million when it shut down its branch campus in Senegal (OBHE, 2012). After University of Waterloo closed its campus in Dubai, it had such a great impact on the institution that campus leaders have no further interest in opening another branch campus (through a personal conversation with the vice provost of University of Waterloo). Strategies utilized by institutions to gain legitimacy in China and Uzbekistan can provide insights that may help international universities in other countries.

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