

UNCOVERING AND ADDRESSING A METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATION IN TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT:

The unprecedented growth of transnational higher education (TNHE) in recent years has raised many concerns, especially on the topic of quality, commercialization and commodization of higher education. Based on a brief review of the literature, the methodological approaches to investigating TNHE issues seem to be quite limited and the convergence of findings may be the unintended consequence of a self-reinforcing cycle of experts' opinions and insiders' perspectives. For instance, the quality assurance mechanism is routinely recommended to be the main driver to enhance TNHE quality. In order to generate alternative perspectives for understanding TNHE issues, the study experiments with two types of reflexivity for interpreting qualitative interview data collected from two Hong Kong cases. The intention is to compel educational researchers to ponder whether the current methodological framework is too limited for studying a topic as complex as transnational higher education invoking multiple stakeholders, inter-cultural communications, social responsibility, values and beliefs.

Keywords: Methodological reflexivity, Introspective reflexivity, Transnational higher education

1. BACKGROUND

Transnational higher education (TNHE) for the design disciplines in Hong Kong has grown exponentially since the liberation of trade in education services beginning in 2003 through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), see (Knight, 2003) for more discussion. Transnational education has been defined as "education in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based (UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2000)." Since the number of students graduated from design-related transnational degree programmes grew exponentially over the past ten years and, in some cases, outnumbered students graduated from publicly-funded local degree programmes, the impact of TNHE on public education is imminent. For instance, the number of registered transnational degree programmes operated by non-profit educational institutions related to the traditional

design discipline including visual communication design, interior design, and product design is 12 in addition to the 5 exempted transnational degree programmes operated by publicly-funded higher education institutions (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2014). The no. of programmes offered now is more than a 5-folded increase compared to the no. of publicly-funded degree programmes (3) for design offered 10 years ago. The number seems to be in contrast with the general increase of participation in post-secondary education from around 20% in 2003/04 to around 40% in 2013/14 (Concourse for Self-financing Post-secondary Education, 2014). Initial educational policies tended to focus on capacity building of TNHE including academic standards, quality assurance of programme delivery and the various modes of collaboration between exporting and importing partners. "Such approaches demonstrate a four dimensional composition, which includes generating economic revenue, boosting capacity building, developing human resources and promoting international understanding. Transnational education is, to a great extent, economically oriented and has now become dominated by market principles. (Gu, 2009)" These early policies directed researchers' attention to an operational level and did not anticipate the rapid scaling up of programmes and graduates in the ever-changing landscape of TNHE.

1.1 THE RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

The major development of the international dimension of higher education over the past few years seems to have gradually shifted from a predominately optimistic outlook of envisioning mutual benefits and international collaboration to becoming more pessimistic, especially on the commodization and commercialization of higher education with serious issues related to quality, newly established mainly for-profit providers, and recognition of credentials (Knight, 2006, 2013). The issue of commercialization of higher education was not new and has been reported by numerous authors. For instance, "current thinking sees international higher education as a commodity to be freely traded and sees higher education as a private good, not a public responsibility (Altbach and Knight, 2007)." "There are tensions between academic and commercial priorities and opportunities for slippery academic standards (McBurnie, 2008)." Altbach and Knight (2007) reporting on the growing influence of the for-profit higher education sector suggest that "foreign providers, almost always aiming to earn a profit, are eager to work with local partners to fill the growing demand." The final discussion also returns to the same issue of quality assurance and recognition. For instance, a typical question raised is that whether different rules should apply if the provider is for-profit or nonprofit, private or public, and institution or a company. Although the authors were concerned that the accreditation process is becoming internationalized and commercialized, they remained optimistic in quality assurances calling for higher education providers to balance quality issues with the financial investment and return.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO INVESTIGATING TNHE ISSUES

The discussion of TNHE falls generally under the umbrella of internationalization in higher education. In an attempt to provide a general state of research on internationalization in higher education, Kehm and Teichler (2007) summaries that systematic analyses on the international dimension of higher education became more complex and intertwined with other issues including mobility of students and academic staff, knowledge transfer, cooperation and competition, substance of teaching, learning and research, institutional strategies and so on. While there are diverse themes drawing from a broad range of disciplines and research domains utilizing concepts or approaches of policy analysis, network theories, and discourse analysis, the modes of inquiry did not change substantially, mainly based on literature review (Kehm and Teichler, 2007), analysis of documents (Smith, 2010), interviews (Feng, 2013), and questionnaire surveys (Fang and Wang, 2014). For instance, Smith's (2010) methodological approach to investigate quality assurance is based on linguistic and textual analysis of codes of practice from major exporters of higher education. She concludes that "ensuring equality educational experiences for students is the overseas institution top priority since the results of poor quality can be both reputationally and financially detrimental to the exporting country. Her main concern is on whether there are opportunities for truly collaborative and culturally appropriate course design and involving local staff in curriculum development activities."

There are also a substantial number of case studies covering various programmes, institutions, actors and countries. For instance, using case studies of two private schools and interviews with key stakeholders, Lim (2009) raises several critical issues concerning the private tertiary education sector in Singapore. For instance, teachers in Singapore's private-education organizations are mainly industry professionals. "The school has no full-time academics, which is another representative feature of the industry. All lecturers are engaged on a sessional basis and work as professionals elsewhere (Lim, 2009)." There were also concerns for the low entry requirements and lack of resources to enforce quality assurance measures effectively and alleged soft marking malpractices (Harman, 2006). Quoting Lockett and McNaught, Lim (2009) also suggests that possible causes of quality-related problems can be due to the exponential growth of the number of key stakeholders (government, professional bodies, institution) involved in cross-border education rendering any consensus impossible. Once more, the author concluded that quality should be considered to be a competitive tool to solve these problems while cautioning that adopting the partnering universities' quality assurance mechanisms without adapting to Singapore's context is also questionable (p.91).

Based on findings from the above studies, the quality assurance mechanism seems to be recommended as the main driver to enhance the quality of programmes, teaching and learning, and graduates. It may be tempted to conclude that there will be nothing major left to be implemented for improving TNHE academically within the next few years. However, Kehm and Teichler (2007) notices that publications on internationalization of higher education tend to

target practitioners and policy makers more strongly than educational researchers. In addition, the research on the international dimension of higher education in most countries except the US is based on a small number of experts in this domain. Combining both seemingly unrelated remarks, there may be an unintended consequence leading to the convergence of experts' opinions and perspective. The self-limiting cycle starts with a limited no. of experts in the domain informing practitioners and policy makers while the resulting policies or behaviors are feedback into the research conducted by the same experts. The assumption may be justified since the conclusions from most studies concerning quality assurance contain a high degree of similarity.

2.1 THE HONG KONG CASE TOWARDS IMPROVING TNHE

"In mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia, the driving force for introducing foreign higher education activities is to increase higher education enrollments and the pace of massification of their higher education system while the main rationale for Hong Kong consumers in choosing transnational programme is to gain an international education with quality (Huang, 2007)."

"Hong Kong does not attempt to directly regulate the quality of transnational higher education, it also does not try to shape the content, level or cost of courses offered by foreign providers. The legislation leaves these decisions to the market, and the state's role is confined to ensuring that all participants in the market have provided information that would enable informed choices to be made by consumers (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2001)." Hong Kong adopting a free-market approach concerning TNHE policies has often been praised over the government-regulated approach in China, Malaysia, and Korea (Huang, 2007). In addition, Hong Kong is also praised for adopting gate-keeping procedures to differentiate substandard foreign education providers through local registration and accreditation (McBurnie, 2008). The recognition suggests that policies adopted by the Hong Kong government are quite advanced in terms of quality assurance procedures.

A recent consultancy report (Policy 21 Ltd., 2014) was published in July this year that summarizes experience from multiple countries including Australia, Canada, USA, Denmark, Ireland, UK, Japan, Singapore and local operators in order to propose a voluntary code of practices on governance and quality assurance for the self-financing post-secondary education sector in Hong Kong. The study method based on interviewing senior management of local operators as well as reviewing official documents concerning quality assurance published by various countries can be shown to be quite limiting. For instance, the resulting recommended code of good practices derived based on the selected method elaborate on well-known quality assurance aspects concerning institutional management, programme design and delivery, staff and student support. The guiding principles of good governance and quality assurance are again summarized into 4 aspects; participation and accountability, inclusiveness, performance, and transparency. Participation and accountability is related to ensuring the governing body are capable of performing their duties with integrity and objectively. Inclusiveness suggests that all

stakeholders are involved in the QA processes. Performance indicators are used to show accountability based on learning outcomes while transparency guarantees the accessibility to key information. These recommendations remind the author of a famous saying that “if you’ve seen one, you have seen them all.” The familiarity of the recommendations from the consultation document seems to further confirm the suspicion that the existing methodology is limiting the perspective and directions when investigating the future of quality assurance for TNHE.

2.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Based on the knowledge gap identified from the literature, there seems to be a major methodological limitation when investigating TNHE issues only from an insider’s and expert’s perspective. Moreover, Kehm and Teichler (2007) caution that “many analyses are so much driven by normative assumptions of the authors and more research is needed to break a circle of narrow normative reasoning.” The study proposes to explore utilizing alternative methods to interpret qualitative interview data through methodological introspection as well as reflexive introspection (Keso et al., 2009) to investigate multifaceted issues of social, cultural and institutional significance. Methodological introspection is considered to be aligned with the scientific realism paradigm in order to produce generalizable scientific knowledge. The purpose is to position the researcher as an outsider or impartial observer against the researched and the effects of a researcher’s subjective values should be minimized. Reflexive introspection is associated with the constructivism paradigm aiming to produce a rich empirical descriptions of a given event, case-company or situation. The presence of researcher’s subjective values is recognized and accepted. The researcher acts as an enthusiastic participant to bring forth alternative interpretations of reality (see also Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Introspective reflexivity brings forward the researchers’ consciousness of being an insider with corresponding personal beliefs, disciplinary and institutional values when interpreting qualitative data (Pels, 2000). Although methodological reflexivity is often advocated to interpret data from a detached outsider perspective for the pursuit of a coherent and reliable understanding of the situation, “the person carrying out the research always has a certain stance toward the questions that are being explored (Parker, 2004).” The study considers that both approaches are not mutually exclusive and the juxtaposition of findings derived from both approaches together can lead to different ways of describing and representing the intrinsic complexity of transnational higher education (TNHE). Moreover, the study may expose the limitations of employing only a methodological reflexive approach to analyze qualitative data since there is a danger of situating the discussion mainly at the “technical” level but often neglecting the social and cultural aspects of higher education. “A growing appreciation of subjectivity, contingency and context can be an invaluable resource for qualitative researchers (Tomkins and Eatough, 2010).” Through an introspective reflexive approach to re-interpret qualitative interview data, we aim to open up aspects that are not accessible by the traditional objective approach to data

interpretation and broaden our understanding of the complex phenomenon from both an insider's and outsider's perspective. Furthermore, the rationale to employ the two approaches simultaneously is to determine whether new insights can be developed for investigating the domain by experimenting at a methodological level.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodological reflexivity is operationized by conducting an initial thematic interpretation from an insider perspective. The author has been working in the field of higher design education for seven years and is engaged with researching and teaching a number of transnational top-up degree programmes in the design disciplines for the past three years. The results are then triangulated with an initial thematic interpretation conducted from an outsider perspective. The external researcher analyzing the same dataset has a Ph.D. in economics and does not have any prior experience researching transnational higher education except that he also has first-hand experience of studying in Hong Kong, Canada, and the US. The results derived from triangulation are considered to be reliable. Introspective reflexivity is operationized by a post-hoc analysis on the initial thematic interpretation by incorporating the author personal, professional and disciplinary stance. The overall discussion is expected to lead to insights concerning quality assurance issues concerning TNHE in Hong Kong. Both interviewees are selected since they have been working in senior management positions at multiple local institutions offering transnational degree programmes.

4. RESULTS

4. 1. INITIAL THEMATIC INTERPRETATION

The first step of analysis is to identify themes inductively from the two expert interview datasets. The interpretation is straightforward and directly based on the interview data. Table 1 demonstrates how the interpretation is derived.

Areas of interest	Excerpts from Expert 1	Excerpts from Expert 2	Initial thematic interpretation by the author
Government policies promoting or helping the top-up programme	In HK, basically it's still free for self-financing units attached to UGC* units to offer transnational top-up degrees subject only to registration as an exempted course under the NLHPE Ordinance*. //P3M	No. To my knowledge the government does not have policies to help or not to help in this area. Usually not much interference, but as long as you are registered, then ... have to go through some quality check, EDB* [HKCAAVQ]*, academic auditing for program quality. // A0:08:20	There is limited interference from the Hong Kong government concerning self-finance top-up degree programmes. Local validation of overseas programmes by HKCAAVQ is required so that students can apply for government loans and grants.
Original purposes for setting up the top-up degree programmes	Very straightforward. For the top up degree in interior design and architecture, to help its own Higher diploma interior design graduates to articulate to a degree. For the 3 year full-time degrees in fashion and fashion design, to compete with other self-financing institutions for S6 students who would like to study for a UK degree in HK. //P3T	If the college itself does not have a degree program, usually a fixed number of AD/HD* programs, ..., [programmes are] usually are set according to students' needs, it will be matched areas' top up degrees in order for further studies opportunities for their students. // A0:03:30 There are two reasons. One is for the college, and the second reason is for the students. Since ... when you read the newspapers, ... some surveys [suggest] that 90% students and their parents hope that they could complete a bachelor degree... Now the same student not only he/she can stay here for the	The main reasons for creating top-up programmes were to support the current higher diploma or associated degree programmes at the institutions and to satisfy the aspirations of parents who expect their children to obtain a bachelor degree qualification after secondary education.

		<p>same associate degree, well ... he can only stay there for another 2 years, now with top-up you have the same students for 4 years rather than two in 4 years. One student x 4 years is better than two students x 2 years. // A0:06:20</p>	
Financial arrangement of programmes	<p>If a top-up degree does not recruit above 20 students per cohort, very hard to breakeven. If someone says they can do it, then there is either hidden subsidy or beware of the quality of teaching and instructional arrangement. //P5M</p> <p>Most institutions go for the bottom-line of being able to achieve breakeven. //P8T</p> <p>Very different, publicly funded HEI* have economy of scale. They plan on institutional level not programme level. //P8T</p>	<p>Even assisting there are multiple modes, for example, about local instructor/tutor and foreign instructors, they could do distance learning, or they could fly to do an intensive course, or supplemented by tutorials by local instructors, it can be different... oversea universities may have a different model. But this will affect fee structure. The reason is that they do not need to send anything, only exam prod, and you need to pay for all the expenses. And some universities operate like a franchise, only do it for one or two institutions. // A0:17:05</p>	<p>Transnational top-up degree programmes need to recruit at least 20 students to breakeven and most institutions go for the bottom-line of being able to achieve breakeven.</p>
Surplus generated from self-finance programmes	<p>Not necessary, as I said most top-up degrees are difficult to breakeven except for those with large no. of students like accounting. //P6T</p> <p>None that I know which is genuinely re-investing surplus in teaching and learning. //P6M</p>	<p>Where does the money go? No one has control over that. VQ and EDB have no rights to regulate. At this moment it just depends on themselves. UGC related institutions, because of reputation, often have a lot of students. Usually they have a bonus system as well. If they don't, they cannot put that into their own pockets. So otherwise, they have very nice offices or facilities. // A0:29:59</p>	<p>Surplus can be achieved by a few big brand names while the surplus is unlikely to be invested to further quality of teaching and learning.</p>
Are these surplus regulated?	<p>Not necessary because Of very few profitable top-up degrees. //P6B</p>	<p>Basically there are no regulations. They only need to be audited by their own universities. // A0:31:54</p>	<p>The usage of surplus is unregulated and depends on the institution autonomy.</p>
Whether more regulations are needed for these self-finance programmes?	<p>No, market based operations let the market correct. It's not about the use of surplus but about dictating how the income from fees should be committed to better teaching and learning. It should come from the institution itself, to make a pledge that it will spend not less than x percent of income in teaching and learning would be better approach. Community colleges in America have this arrangement. //P6B</p>	<p>it is a free market. You cannot say because they earn a lot and you have to regulate then. Why do they earn more money? Maybe they have very high quality and therefore it attracts a lot of students. You cannot punish these good ones which attract students. // A0:32:21</p>	<p>The free market principle should be adhered while teaching and learning quality may be enhanced by allocating a fixed percentage of income for that purpose.</p>
Academic exchanges from overseas collaboration	<p>seldom at Bachelor top up, may be possible for masters but also very rare. //P8B</p>	<p>Yes, but I don't think it has reached the maximum. It depends on ... individual university or individual lecturer, their willingness to exchange. Exchange always exists, for example in one of the models, they fly in to teach, it is a form of exchange. How do they co-operate? It is also a form of exchange. Even all done by local lecturers, they only show up in exam boards, it is still a form of, minimal, exchange... In this extreme mode there's no communication with their staff. Different forms of operations. You can still learn something. // B0:03:17</p>	<p>A minimal amount academic exchange is achieved in these top-up programmes and the exchange is mainly related to teaching but not to research.</p>
The lack of general education (GE) in top-up programmes	<p>I don't believe in this being a significant factor. First you must prove that having GE in local degrees actually confers an advantage. //P9T</p>	<p>AD is for GE and academic, HD is for vocational based study. If you choose to do HD, you should not expect a lot of GE elements, in either the old or new system. There is no time to nurture these. // B0:07:35</p>	<p>General education does not seem to be important to top-up programmes.</p>
Survival of programmes	<p>To my knowledge, those institutions offering top-up and overseas degrees do not have the luxury of thinking far into the horizons. They are simply preoccupied with programme advertising and making sure the programmes can still recruit sufficient no. of students. //P4B</p>	<p>Or there's another thing if you are very unique. // B0:36:55</p>	<p>Survival of programmes will always be the main concern to the local partner.</p>

Table 1: An initial thematic interpretation by the author.

NLHPE Ordinance	Non-Local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance
EDB	Education Bureau
HKCAAVQ	Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications
AD	Associated Degree
HD	Higher Diploma
UGC	University Grant Council
QA	Quality Assurance
Uni	University
HEI	Higher Education Institution
GE	General Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technology

3. 2. TRIANGULATION WITH THE INTERPREATION BY AN EXTERNAL RESEARCHER

Only part of the interpretation is showed in Table 2.

Areas of interest	Excerpts from Experts	Initial thematic interpretation by an external researcher
Financial arrangements	Expert 1 (P.5): Nonetheless, there are no requirements on the surplus of self-financed sub-degree programme operated by the non-UGC funded institutes.	It is a shock to me that there were no government regulation on the profit margin.
	Expert 1 (P.4): Often this is 25% of the income but can go up to 50%. Expert 2 (P.4/0:18:00): Or they could just charge a lump-sum, does not matter how many students you admitted, \$300k, \$500k or \$1M. they don't care if you admit 10 or 1000 students, and they don't care if you are making a loss or not.	Both experts seem to have a different view on the cost structure or budgeting. Expert 1 argued that it is "hard to breakeven with very few students" when 25-50% budget goes to partner. Expert 2 also mentioned those cases but also noted that local partners sometimes have to pay a lump sum only (300k to 1mil). Of course as Expert 2 noted, it depends on the delivery mode and the teaching staff ratio.
	Expert 2 (P.5/0:18:30): Some are intensive. Some will fly (to Hong Kong), will not fly, teaching in a week, intensive, 14 weeks, online. Depends on which universities, or even different universities in a single country may have different models.	As Expert 2 noted, it is important to consider how the teaching is delivered, whether foreign partners do an intensive teaching for a few weeks or distance learning.
Internal management	Expert 2 (P.6/0:25:00): Actually, I think, ones that earn the most are UGC related and they are more problematic than the others ... They are under UGC, and this is a problem: they are not universities, just an extensive arm, and so UGC cannot control that too. So they just say they are regulated, or regulated by their own universities.	It is also pretty shocking to me that there exists such a huge difference on how the programs are accredited between UGC-funded programs and self-finance top-up programs. As both experts noted, that UGC funded or related programs make a lot more profit than others, probably because of the reputation in the local market.
Curriculum management	Expert 1 (P.8): I don't believe in this being a significant factor. First you must prove that having GE in local degrees actually confers an advantage. Expert 2 (P.12/0:09:00(2)): [Q: Say if a student studied HD and a 1-year top-up, would the student be at a disadvantage?] I don't think so....	Both experts do not think that lack of general education modules is a problem but I do. I believe that the curriculum does not have to go too technical for the job purpose unless it is a professional degree like law or medicine, and it should allow the student to broaden their view as well as acquire other soft skills. Sometimes these experiences may give another advantage to some employers.
Quality assurance	Expert 1 (P.9): QA culture of validation/ revalidation/ accreditation only ensures that programme meets bottonline quality. If you want true quality, it has to come from dedicated teachers, good managers and curriculum localisation where necessary.	I am pleasantly surprised that the government has very limited role on the quality assurance. It seems from the excerpts that government has made sure these programs have met the basic standards. All depend on advertisement from the program coordinators themselves.
	Expert 2 (P.15/0:17:42(2)): I think it is a coincidence; it might not be cause and consequence. There might be a lot of reasons [why they have to do AD]...	Expert 2 spent some time arguing that students in top-up or self-finance may not be low achievers, but from my point of view these certainly affect their ability to choose the best programs which affect their learning experience, hence they are 'stuck' being low achievers. That all depends on how the education system works in Hong Kong.

Table 2: An initial thematic interpretation by an external researcher.

The external researcher suggests that information flow would have been crucial if the "free market principles" were to be upheld. Nonetheless, he believes that the market needs to be regulated since there is a huge entry cost which deters many potential entrants into the market. As a result, the self-finance higher education market will potentially have only a few competitors. The same line of reasoning can be extended to the cases of electric or telecommunication utilities, or what are called natural monopolies. What may be more

problematic is when these institutions collude and increase their tuition charges. In a world where there is little public information concerning these programmes, the consumers (students) may have no idea what the fair price is. He also agrees that there might not be a need to monitor the surplus or some kinds of auditing measures can be introduced. Given that there are limited vacancies in UGC-funded institutions, the rest of the qualified students may have no choice but to choose these transnational degree programmes. The government should be in an active role to monitor and enforce the quality of these programmes and ensure the quality of the graduates.

4. 3. POST-HOC REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS

The post-hoc introspective reflexive analysis aims to provide a personal, functional, and disciplinary stance when interpreting the various themes developed from the initial thematic analysis. Only three crucial aspects are selected to illustrate the potential for alternative interpretations.

For instance, the most direct interpretation for understanding the original purposes of setting up transnational top-up degree programmes was to support the current higher diploma or associated degree programmes at the institutions and to satisfy the aspirations of parents who expect their children to obtain a bachelor degree qualification after secondary education. From my personal stance, I would consider that although the government policy for higher education is often formulated from a top-down and global perspective aiming to achieve certain macro goals such as promoting economic growth in a knowledge-based economy or maintaining competitiveness in the global marketplace, motives from local actors at an institutional or individual level can be very different. It remains unclear whether the individual motives and macro goals are aligned properly or whether the two factors are causally related. Higher education will also be a focus in good economic times and bad economic times for dubious reasons. One thing is certain that massification of higher education takes an immense amount of resources (human, capital, knowledge, time, etc.) from the government, academia, and private parties.

Another theme is concerned with the discussion of surplus generated from operations. Expert 1 considers that surplus can be achieved by a few big brand names while the surplus is unlikely to be invested to further quality of teaching and learning. Both experts agreed that the usage of surplus is unregulated and depends on the institution autonomy. My functional and professional stance suggests that although the two experts agree that surplus itself is not the issue, two separate concerns of surplus are raised.

The first concern is whether surplus is achieved by proper means that focus on enhancing teaching and learning quality of programmes. Some established institutions are able to utilize their unique positions (an extension of the UGC-funded institutions) to gain an unfair advantage in terms of regulations and recognition against non UGC-funded institutions in the marketplace.

A few dominant institutions in the market can only be considered to be oligopolies rather than a free market competition.

The second issue is whether the usage of surplus will ultimately motivate the use of improper means to generate more surpluses. The handing out of bonuses to staff may be considered to be common practices for commercial enterprises. Nonetheless, the linking of teaching quality to staff bonuses would seem more reasonable at an educational institution incidentally operating under market principles than linking pure operational profits of programmes to bonuses at a commercial entity providing educational services. As an insider, I notice that it is a norm that part of the revenue from self-finance programmes will be redirected to the centralized unit of the institution and used for a variety of purposes. For both cases, there might or might not be any potential conflicts of interests. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether the priority of teaching quality is properly established in the self-finance higher education institutions. Without a clear priority, the conflicting values of academic autonomy and a free market economy cannot be used simultaneously to guide the development of self-finance higher education sector. For instance, there is a recent report that one of the UGC-funded institutions is considering to sell its self-finance unit to an external private party. The implicit priority inferred from the institution intention seems to be the role of a commercial entity providing educational services while taxpayer money is conveniently utilized.

The third aspect is related to the issue of whether students can make informed choices among various programmes offered on the market. Expert 2 suggests that more information (e.g. student-to-staff ratio (SSR), part-time/full-time staff ratio, teachers' qualifications) should be provided so that students can make informed decisions. My disciplinary stance suggests that transparency of information concerning various teaching quality indicators is a pre-requisite for making informed decisions. Nonetheless, transparency by itself may not be sufficient since one of the experts also said that students often select to enroll in a programme because their classmates or peers also enroll in the same programme. There is a real disadvantage for students who are the first generation in the family to receive a college education since they do not have anyone in the family to guide them. Furthermore, they have to rely on teachers or peers to help them make decisions. When investigating Chinese students' choice of transnational higher education in mainland China, Fang and Wang (2014) found that many students felt that they were not informed enough before entering the programmes since the traditional information channels including high school teachers, relatives, friends, governmental websites/departments, and application guidebooks are not able to provide high quality information.

The same situation also applied to me when I was a student. I did not have enough understanding of what a college education mean or stood for when the admission rate to universities was around 2 % in the early 1990s. Informed decisions cannot be made under these circumstances even with transparency of information. A student's inability to evaluate the

relevance of educational offerings may ultimately lead to a misalignment between educational outcomes and labor market demand (Bolton and Nie, 2010).

5. DISCUSSION

The instruction given to the external researcher for analyzing the transcripts was intentionally limited in order not to interfere with his natural inclination. Only two basic steps were provided. The first step is to identify major themes inductively from the transcripts and the next step is to summarize interesting themes from a subjective perspective and reflect on the findings. The main surprise from the study is that perhaps, due to the few instructions given, the external researcher needs to engage in a self-reflexive act of utilizing his personal expertise and disciplinary stance to interpret the qualitative data. In terms of findings, I did not anticipate to find anything new based on the limited interview datasets. The original purpose of the study was a response to a perceived limitation of methodology and an attempt to experiment with two types of reflexivity in order to stimulate and widen the discussion of TNHE from alternative perspectives. The methodological exploration for interpretation is shown to be useful for generate new perspectives of understanding themes that have been investigated numerous times before. For instance, the external researcher expresses his feeling as being shocked multiple times when he was introduced to themes related to financial arrangements and internal management. Although he had experience in participating in higher education in multiple countries, this is the first time that he examined the issue from an outsider and a critic perspective. Any situation appeared to fall under the notion of common senses to insiders become uncommon to outsiders. The results seem to confirm the initial suspicion of an overly-narrow focus to investigate TNHE issues based on the existing methodology. "These insights raise questions about the capacity of existing quality assurance frameworks to accommodate drivers of change and shifting stakeholder expectations in transnational higher education (Bolton & Nie, 2010, p. 703)." It is my intention that the exploration using reflexivity will compel educational researchers to ponder whether the current methodological framework is too limited for studying a topic as complex as transnational education invoking multiple stakeholders, inter cultural communications, social responsibility, values and beliefs.

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