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# Navigating global-local tensions in accountability/autonomy policies: Comparative case studies in 'Asian' universities

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## Introduction

The twin policy domains of accountability and autonomy have featured in recent education reforms in many countries, signalling new relationships between governments and educational institutions. Despite different national and localised contexts, a number of common 'global' trends have been identified in these policy domains. However, simultaneously context-specific differences are also evident. Our research is located within the tensions between global commonalities and localised differences in educational policies and practices.

This paper reports an ongoing research project on changing accountability and autonomy in higher education in three 'Asian' countries. Empirical data has been collected in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong (HK) and Singapore. After analysis of national policy documents, two different types of universities ('old/traditional' and 'new/technological') became case study sites in each country for the analysis of both commonalities and differences in accountability and autonomy policies and practices.

The paper is divided into 5 sections. First, the phenomenon of globalisation which forms a **conceptual framework** for the study is problematised. Second, the **contextual background** for the study is presented in the form of a brief overview of changing accountability and autonomy policies in the three countries, as reported in the literature. Third, the methodological framings for the study are explicated. The fourth section of the paper provides a preliminary window into one part of the **data collected through interviews in China** – accountability policies and practices – as reported by respondents in two case study universities to offer a small 'taste' of empirical findings. The fifth and final section points, tentatively, to some of the **key issues** to emerge from the data, although it must be emphasised that this is a tentative discussion rather than a conclusion at this point, given that the project as a whole incorporates much more data from PRC, HK and Singapore, providing the basis for more extensive comparisons and contrasts.

## A conceptual framing: globalisation

It is increasingly difficult to understand education policies and practices without reference to globalisation processes (Crossley, 2000). The concept of globalisation is complex and contested and often contradictory, but most usually it refers to the greater interconnectedness of the world, "to flows of people and services, both globally and locally" (Eggins, 2003, p1). Many commentators distinguish three principal forms of globalisation – economic, political and cultural (eg Olssen et al., 2004) whereas others such as Bottery (2000) have identified other forms as well, including demographic, managerial and environmental globalisation.

Two main approaches to the concept of globalisation can be distinguished. The first, politically neutral, approach defines globalisation as an empirical reality in terms of the compression of time and space (e.g. Robertson, 1995), or as Castells (2000) has referred to it 'space of flows' and 'timeless time', particularly associated with instantaneous communications technology. The second approach identifies globalisation more as an economic discourse which actively promulgates a market ideology, and results from policies of neo-liberal governmentality (Olssen et al, 2004). Thus, globalisation can be seen to have both technical and ideological dimensions. The increasing impact of supranational organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD), World Bank and International Monetary Fund (powerful global regulators), as well as the emergence of a 'global policy community' (Henry et al., 2001), are also relevant in understanding globalising processes.

There are some commentators who argue that globalisation seriously threatens the legitimacy of the nation-state and weakens its power to set its own policy directions, and others who argue that the impact of globalisation on the integrity of the nation-state has been significantly over-estimated. Further, there are some who argue that with globalisation, pressures towards homogeneity (policy convergences) prevail and others who argue that heterogeneity (policy divergences) still predominate across and within different nation-states. Bottery (2000) takes a position that while nation-states do continue to exert their influences in a globalising world, there has been a noticeable loss of power for national governments in the face of supra-national forces. He also argues that both convergences and divergences in national and local policies and practices are simultaneously evident with globalisation, especially as different countries have different histories and change at different rates. In terms of the impact of globalisation on economic and social inequalities, Bottery (2000) cites Brecher in implicating globalisation in 'a race to the bottom', as they argue that it exacerbates such inequalities both between and within nation-states, while others have argued that globalisation also brings the potential for greater harmonisation (e.g. Eggins, 2003). We take a similar position to that of Bottery, underscoring the complexities of globalisation as it plays out in different ways at different times and in different places, and we are particularly interested in power differentials created and entrenched by globalisation.

To focus now more specifically on higher education, the advent of a 'global knowledge economy' has brought universities, as key producers and disseminators of knowledge, onto centre stage in public policy making agendas. Naidoo (2003) argues that governments have reconfigured universities as a 'global commodity', restructuring them to be more responsive to both government intervention and market forces to enhance national economic positioning in the global arena. While it could be argued that universities have always been 'international' in character (see Porter and Vidovich, 2000), there has been a significant upturn in flows of people and services beyond national borders. Marginson (2003, p. 18) associates globalisation in higher education with "cross-border communities, cross-border flows of people (staff and students, which ... includes fee paying international students); cross border flows of research and knowledge; cross border flows of money in international educational trade; and inter-country and inter-institutional collaborations, negotiation and recognition protocols in many areas".

Referring specifically, again, to higher education, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) offer a useful conceptual framing for the dynamic interrelationships between global, national and local levels, which they refer to as a 'glo-na-cal agency heuristic'. They do not see global phenomena as universalistic or determinist, and so they continue to emphasise the relevance of national and local dimensions. For them, the 'agency' in 'glonacal agency' can mean either an organization, or the ability of people individually and collectively to take action. They highlight that both forms of agency can apply to global, national and local levels. In fact, we would suggest that 'agency' might potentially be exerted continuously at all points between these three main levels, with for example, regional levels (between global and national levels, such as the European Union and Asia-Pacific region) becoming increasingly important in policy arenas. The 'glonacal agency heuristic' identifies different dimensions of influence of organisational agencies and collective human action: 'reciprocity', 'strength' 'layers and conditions' and 'spheres'. Reciprocity refers to the notion that influences flow in more than one direction, suggesting two-way exchanges between all levels in the 'glonacal'. Strength indicates the magnitude and directness of influence, in addition to resources at the disposal of agencies and agents. Layers and conditions refers to resilient historical structures and practices of institutions, systems and countries that

impact on their influence activity. Finally, spheres indicates the scope of influence (geographical and functional) of agents and agency. This heuristic, then, represents globalisation in a far more complex and dynamic way than simply as an omnipresent top-down pressure on nation-states and institutions. There is also a strong potential to tease out the finer nuances of power relationships with such a conceptual tool. In this study, we wish to emphasise such complex and dynamic interrelationships in globalising processes. (See Vidovich (2004) for an application of Marginson and Rhoades' glonacal agency heuristic to 'quality' policy processes in Australian higher education).

Although Scott (2000) has emphasised that globalisation is the most fundamental challenge facing universities in their history, we would argue that the precise nature of these challenges will not be uniform across, or even within, different countries. Our exploration of globalisation is situated within specific countries and specific universities in the early 2000s. The PRC, HK and Singapore are the starting points for our investigations on globalisation processes in 'Asian' universities to begin to redress a 'Western' hegemony in this field. However, there is no intention to homogenise the vast array of higher education policies and practices in the region under the label of 'Asian', or to extrapolate the findings from this study to other countries in the region or to make crude comparisons with 'Western' countries *en bloc*. One major problem of the existing literature is the tendency for arguments about globalisation to be based on sweeping generalisations and abstract theoretical assertions insufficiently connected to specific historical examples and evidence (Yang, 2002). There are still too few studies on the implications of globalisation processes grounded in detailed examinations of particular historical times and geographical spaces. Empirical comparative studies in newly developing countries are especially lacking. Furthermore, many 'Asian' countries are actively competing for leadership in the evolving global knowledge economy, and it is therefore timely to turn up the research focus on education policies and practices within countries of this region. Just as Latin American scholarship has contributed dependency theory and Freirean notions of education for critical consciousness and liberation, the literature of Asia (and Africa) will help offset the hegemony of European and North American scholarship (Arnove, 1999; Masemann, 1997). The 'West' may also reach a situation faced by Japan and China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where it too will need to broaden its focus to increasingly encompass scholarship from other parts of the world (Hayhoe, 1997). Thus, this study aims to make a contribution to redressing some of this global research imbalance.

### **Contextual framings in PRC, HK and Singapore**

Singapore and HK, in particular, are vying to be educational hubs in the Asia-Pacific region and the two governments have initiated policies to redefine the functions of their universities, introducing quality assurance mechanisms, diversifying funding sources, and reforming university governance systems (Lee, 2001). With its entrance into the World Trade Organisation (WTO), PRC has significantly increased its position internationally as a socio-economic and geopolitical force, as it has shifted from its isolationist, politics-oriented policies to open door, economic-oriented policies. This change was accompanied by major reforms in higher education, which were ascribed as occupying a key supporting role in the drive to modernise the nation (Agelasto and Adamson, 1998).

In all three countries, there is a desire to be competitive internationally and to look to the policies of other countries to determine the best way to develop 'world class' universities. To achieve this, the governments in each country have adopted policies of decentralisation to allow more autonomy and flexibility to universities to induce greater creativity; however at the same time, they have introduced controls and regulations through accountability. One mechanism for introducing greater autonomy was to introduce block funding and triennial budgets (1996 in HK and 2000 in Singapore) and then to strengthen their performance reviews and incentive funding in an attempt to make their

universities more competitive internationally. These indicators of decentralisation and then recentralisation suggest that governments are in the process of re-establishing control so that instead of a genuine policy of decentralisation, a number of commentators consider the policies to be 'centralised decentralisation' (Mok, 2000; Lee, 2001) or as others have described these policies in OECD countries as 'steering at a distance' (Kickert, 1991) or 'self-regulation' (Neave and Van Vught, 1991). According to Mok and Lee (2002), the HK government's control of universities has actually been strengthened instead of weakened. Mok (2001) makes a similar observation about Singapore when suggesting that giving universities autonomy has not necessarily meant the state's control and regulation has been reduced as "the introduction of stringent measures to hold universities accountable to the public and the implementation of various kinds of quality assurance activities in Singapore's universities are clear indicators of recentralisation" (2001, p. 10). In China this phenomenon has been described as a 'deregulated state model' or an 'interventionist state model', meaning the central government maintains a relatively tight control over higher education policies (Hawkins, 1999) but also introduces market mechanisms to reduce the burden of financing higher education alone (Kooiman, 2000). Overall, though, government capacity to control higher education through accountability actually grows.

There is a strong state in the three countries under investigation: Singapore, Hong Kong, and the PRC. However, the impact of globalisation may have altered the state into a more 'competitive state' and led to the introduction of market forces into public sector management. All three countries have drawn on the rhetoric and practices of new public management to deliver their accountability policies. As PRC was the first to introduce such policies, we start with its reforms, and then turn to those of Hong Kong and Singapore.

### **China**

Chinese universities are under great pressure from the central government to adopt finance-driven reforms, emphasising decentralisation, privatisation and better performance (Carnoy, 2000), although some observers have argued that this pressure has undermined some of the best of its traditions (eg Liu, 1998). The economic rhetoric of individual rights and ideologies of efficiency are fast gaining momentum in China (Kwong, 1997). Strong market forces and the ideas of corporate management have affected the way universities operate in China. With heavy weight being attached to the principles of efficiency and quality in higher education, Chinese universities are subjected to unprecedented external scrutiny. Concerns for value for money and public accountability have dominated policies. Within a context of entrepreneurial efficiency and effectiveness, Chinese universities are under immense pressures to generate revenue. Adding revenue generation as the 'third responsibility' in addition to teaching and research has become an important mission of many Chinese universities from the most prestigious, city-based ones, such as Beijing and Tsinghua universities, to the provincial ones. As the Chinese government moved towards greater delegation of power to its universities, it began to attach greater importance to 'social supervision' as a way of ensuring the quality of higher education in the longer term (Xu, Qi & Wang, 2001).

Chinese universities are increasingly required by the state and the public to be responsive to the market-oriented economy. China started to adopt reform policies of decentralisation in the mid-1980s. The promulgation of the *Decision of Reform of Educational System* by the Chinese Communist Party in 1985 marks the first comprehensive reform in Chinese higher education sector. It put emphasis on local responsibility, diversity of educational opportunities, multiple sources of educational funds, and decentralisation of power to individual institutions' authorities in governing their own affairs.

Along this line, the *Outlines of Reform and Development of Chinese Education* issued by the State Council and the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1993

moved much further. This policy document suggested that the central government play the role of macro-manager through legislation, allocation of funding, planning, information service, policy guidance and essential administration, while universities independently provide education geared to the needs of society under the supervision of the government. By the late 1990s, through implementing a series of policies of decentralisation and marketisation, the Chinese government had initiated fundamental changes in the orientation, financing, curriculum, and management of higher education (Agelasto & Adamson, 1998). Through donations and loans, some supra-national agencies began playing an increasingly prominent role in promoting this market ideology. The influence of the World Bank's financial power has led to its strategic collaboration with the central government (Drake, 2001). The OECD has had less direct institutionalised involvement in working with the Chinese government but it nonetheless an important influence on its higher education policies. The WTO's potential effect is yet to be realised (Robertson, Bonal & Dale, 2002) but again is a significant operator in China's economic reforms and consequently these reforms are likely to affect universities.

In China, the 'interventionist state model' is exemplified by the current policy push for university mergers (Yang, 2000). One major goal was to achieve economic benefits with an assumption that larger units, based on economies of scale, would yield qualitatively stronger academic institutions, better management and more cost-effective use of administrative resources. It was not surprising, then, that the primary impetus came from the government with specific policies emphasising efficiency in running higher education (Sanyal, 1995). This echoes the situation in many other parts of the world (Harman & Meek, 2002), where mergers could be understood as a way to enhance the research and teaching performance of universities and as a means to reduce public expenditure.

### **Hong Kong**

Hong Kong is less state-centric in its approach to economic and social change than either Singapore or China, having embraced a more free-enterprise approach. However, there is concern expressed, for example in the protests against *Article 23* in 2003, that the state is becoming more interventionist since the hand-over to China in 1997. In terms of higher education policy, the University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in 1965 as an intermediary between the government and the universities so the government has less direct control over higher education policies. Nevertheless, with the introduction of its quality assurance processes more control is being reinserted into the higher education system by the UGC.

Hong Kong began its quality assurance processes with its Research Assessment Exercise, RAE, (1993, 1996 and 1999); then its Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review, TLQPR, (1995 and 2001); and finally its Management Review (1999). The RAE was an assessment of the quantity of articles published in international peer-reviewed journals and determined the proportion of active researchers in terms of departments and then the institutions as a whole instead of individuals. The TLQPR was not an assessment *per se* but rather a quality process review that did not evaluate quality itself but focused on the processes that are believed to produce quality (Massy, 1997). The Management Review examined management practices in the development of strategic plans, resource application, service delivery and information systems. Based on the *Principles of Good Management Practice* (University Grants Commission Secretariat, 1999), it identified practices that it wanted universities to implement.

Hong Kong introduced harsher accountability measures from the beginning with its RAE and more recently its Management Review that have drawn considerable criticism from academics. Mok and Lee (2002) note that the government's role in the control of education was strengthened instead of weakened as a result of the RAE exercises and the Management Review. They noted that "the UGC has been criticised for imposing an ethos

of managerialist governance and administration in the universities, which threatens severely the traditional and sacrosanct ideals of academic freedom and institutional autonomy” (p. 228). In particular, they concluded that “the UGC’s Management Review has been perceived as a landmark for an external gatekeeping body to intervene crudely in the governance of local universities” (p. 229).

By introducing certain external reviews, this puts pressure on universities to change their internal procedures to be more in line with the outputs and principles recognised by the external reviewers. Thus, a ‘publish or perish’ phenomenon has become the norm in Hong Kong universities as a result of the RAE, linking research output to appointments, promotions, substantiations (tenure) and extensions beyond retirement (Cheng, 2002).

### **Singapore**

Singapore is a particularly good example of how a government can manipulate globalisation forces to justify its own local political agendas (Mok and Lee, 2001). It also shows how local, national and global processes are dynamically intertwined. Singapore has been described as a government-made society (Low, 1998) that uses a variety of economic, political and social tools to achieve its national goals. It is proactive in its higher education policies, attempting to ‘remake the nation’ into an innovative and creative society. There is a lot of emphasis on thinking globally and adopting an enterprising spirit at the same time that the government wants its citizens to remain rooted in Singapore and committed to national goals. As early as 1996, Gopinathan predicted that Singapore’s state-centric approach to social change would interact with globalisation in a distinct way. He suggested, “Even as educational paradigms and ideas take on a global character, the factors that determine educational policies are essentially national in character” (1996, p. 18).

Singapore initially allowed its universities to introduce their own internal quality processes. These were quite effective in developing more stringent tenure policies, rewards for teaching and incentives for good research performance and staff training to upgrade skills (Lee and Gopinathan, 2002). Then it began to be more interventionist by introducing performance based remuneration in 2000, international benchmarking in 2001, and allocated funds according to results to universities in 2003.

The introduction of public sector reforms began in 1995 in Singapore. As the two public universities are run as statutory boards by the government, they have to comply with *Public Service for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The core values this policy are cost effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and quality customer service. Even though Singapore has been described as an interventionist government, it has only recently introduced accountability measures that are linked to funding allocations. It preferred earlier to allow universities to develop their own quality assurance processes.

The two public Singaporean universities have introduced an appraisal system in the areas of teaching, research and administration. This was linked with performance-based pay in 2001 and universities had their research results linked to funding during 2003. Thus, Singapore’s government is moving in the direction of Hong Kong and adding external monitoring to its internal quality processes. External reviews will be held every three years after the initial one in 2001.

Another way that Singaporean universities have tried to increase their research reputations is to recruit talented local and overseas academics. So besides trying to change the internal culture to be more innovative by providing staff training to upgrade skills, they have mainly brought in talent from outside to boost their research profiles. The Singaporean government has also encouraged the collaboration of local institutions with overseas institutions. In Singapore, the Economic Development Board is in charge of attracting world class universities from overseas to establish their outposts in Singapore. They set the target of attracting ten universities into Singapore by 2008 to make the city-

state a genuine educational hub in the region. Five universities were there in 2003 – John Hopkins, Wharton, Chicago Graduate Schools, Georgia Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology – thereby actively bringing global influences directly into Singapore.

### **Methodological framings**

In this study, policy is viewed broadly, consistent with a definition as "both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended" (Ball, 1994, p. 10). Policy is increasingly seen as a process in which there is extensive negotiation, resistance and transformation of the original intent as it plays out in everyday life. Policy analysis should then include examination of factors influencing the production of the policy text, the text itself, ongoing negotiation and changes to the text, and the resultant effects and consequences (Taylor et al., 1997). This broad approach means that policy is to be found everywhere, and not just at the macro level of central government (Ozga, 2000), and therefore the perspectives of practitioners at the micro level within individual institutions become integral to fully understanding education policy processes.

Recently, policy studies have focused on the tensions between the degree of constraint placed on the whole policy process from the macro level, on the one hand, and the degree of 'free' agency of individual practitioners to 'remake' policy at the micro level, on the other hand. The approach taken in this study is to move beyond this dichotomy and to track policy on accountability and autonomy in higher education from global contexts (macro level), through national level policies in Singapore, HK and PRC, to policy reconstruction and practices within individual higher education institutions (micro level) in those countries. The emphasis is on the dynamic interactions between macro constraint and micro agency, and the way the inherent tensions play out within particular universities (see Vidovich, 2002).

The theoretical framework adopted in this research is an hybrid. It revolves around interpretivist theory (micro level focus); critical theory (macro level focus); and the concept of a 'policy cycle' (which can link micro and macro levels). Interpretivist theory is relevant for its micro-sociological focus within individual universities. It is based on a belief that social actors construct a world of lived reality by attaching specific meanings to local situations. "It looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty 1998, p. 67). Interpretivists believe that knowledge is always local and embedded in organisational sites. For the 'bigger picture' at state/national and global levels, critical theory offers valuable analytic insights. Critical theory is about unearthing changing power relationships with a view to offering voice to 'the unheard' and challenging inequalities (Crotty, 1998).

This study achieves coherence by conceptualising policy processes associated with accountability and autonomy in the form of continuous cycles. The use of the concept of a 'policy cycle' (Ball, 1994) can link macro and micro levels of policy processes. According to this conceptual framework, a number of different contexts of the policy process are distinguished for analytic purposes: 'influences,' 'policy text production,' 'effects/consequences,' and 'outcomes' (Ball, 1994; Taylor et al., 1997). The context of influence is where interest groups struggle over the construction of policy discourses; the context of policy text production focuses on the *who*, *how* and *what* of the policy text as it is being produced; the context of effects/consequences is where policy is subject to multiple interpretations by practitioners; and finally the context of outcomes examines the macro-level effects of policies, especially in relation to changing power relationships between the different institutions of society.

In analysing accountability and autonomy policy processes in PRC, HK and Singapore, a case study approach is highlighted to gain an in-depth understanding of the relevant policy processes from within individual universities in their unique settings. Each of the six



universities in this investigation is a case study. A case study approach is proposed because it allows detailed data to be collected at a single site, thereby enabling the researcher to gain an understanding of the complexities of that particular site (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) and to preserve a sense of the 'wholeness' of the site being investigated (Punch, 1998). Although different types of universities in each country will be represented, there is no intention to claim generalisability of findings to all universities in these countries. However, readers are invited to reflect on the themes emerging from the case studies and to make their own judgments about potential transferability to their own context (Walford, 2001). As Uhrmacher (1993) states, case studies can constitute heuristic devices or 'good tools for thinking with', tools that can provide the reader with guides for anticipating what may be found in other situations. In this study, cross-case analysis is undertaken to identify common themes evident across universities within and between countries, and also importantly, to identify differences within and between countries. Themes emerging from a meta level cross-case analysis provide insights into rapidly evolving policies on accountability/autonomy in higher education, within a context of globalisation.

Sampling involves the selection of particular countries and particular universities. As this research is located within a context of globalisation of education policy, more than one national context is highly desirable. Three different countries have been chosen – Singapore, HK and the PRC – to represent a continuum of policy change in the domains of accountability and autonomy in their respective university sectors as they reposition themselves in a global arena where education is the centrepiece. The discussion earlier in the paper on the selection of 'Asian' countries to begin to counterbalance the 'Western' hegemony in research on globalisation is also relevant to the purposive sampling (Punch, 1998) of these particular three countries.

After national policy documents on accountability/autonomy in each country were analysed, we chose universities that reflect different types of institutions within the sector: 'old/traditional' and 'new/technological' universities. Two universities were purposively selected within each country to represent these types, although it is acknowledged that with any typology, 'pure' types rarely exist in reality, and there is often overlap between different categories. The case study universities are listed below with the asterisk(\*) marking the 'old/traditional' universities in each country:

- National University of Singapore\*
- Nanyang University of Technology (Singapore)
- Hong Kong University\*
- City University of Hong Kong
- Nanjing University\* (PRC)
- Nanjing University of Science and Technology (PRC)

Both documentary and interview data were collected from each case study institution. It is the interview data from the two case study universities in China on accountability policies and practices which are reported in the next section.

### **Interviews in China: Accountability**

"To be accountable, conventionally, is to be '*held to account*', defining a relationship of formal control between parties, one of whom is mandatorily held to account to the other for the exercise of roles and stewardship of public resources" (Ranson, 2003, p. 460). Ranson goes on to point out that accountability is usually experienced as a specific event such as an annual performance appraisal, and, in theory, public trust is established through specifying performance and then regulating compliance. However, he emphasises the complex, multiple and reciprocal relationships in accountability. Currie et al. (2003) draw on the work of Trow (1996) and Romzek (2000) to explore different types of accountability, focussing particularly on the distinctions between external and internal forms and the

implications these have for the autonomy of universities and academics. They also note the shift from *ex ante* (before changes) and *ex post* (after changes) accountability in an era of globalisation. The evolving concept of accountability is explored again, in relation to the data obtained in this study, in the final discussion of the paper.

This section reports on the ways in which accountability policies and practices play out in Chinese universities, as revealed by interviews with respondents in late 2003. The focus is on two case study institutions both located in Jiangsu Province – Nanjing University (NU) and Nanjing University of Science and Technology (NUST). These institutions are situated somewhat differently within the Chinese higher education system (1070 universities in total), as briefly sketched in the paragraphs to follow.

Nanjing University (NU) was founded in 1902 as a comprehensive university, with a liberal orientation. It has very strong programs in humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences. By contrast, engineering is relatively weak, although NU is beginning to build engineering programs. The university has a long history and has consistently ranked in the top ten in China, although its rank has slipped in the last few years from third to sixth, and this has been the source of some concern. These rankings are conducted by non-government organizations but are widely published and frequently referred to.

Nanjing University of Science and Technology (NUST) is a specialist engineering university, and its humanities and social sciences are relatively weak by contrast with its science and technology programs. NUST has a good reputation within the higher education system but does not have the status of NU. It originated as a military college, and continues to enjoy close links with the military. In the 1960s, it became a provincial university. NUST is not characterised by the liberal orientation evident at NU. In the year that the data was collected (2003) it was ranked forty-fifth.

Most of the themes to emerge from the data were in common across the two case study universities, but differences between the two institutions also existed, and these are noted. Quotes are used extensively to allow respondents' voices to be heard, and an audit trail is provided with respondents numbered and indicated as U if from Nanjing University (NU) and T if from Nanjing University of Science and Technology (NUST). The discussion of findings opens with respondents' views about the policy push to create 'world class universities' in China, as we would argue that it is within this framework that significant changes to accountability policies and practices are being developed.

### ***Globalisation – creating 'world class' universities***

Most respondents equated globalisation with China's policy of opening up to the world. Generally they viewed globalisation in positive terms, as an opportunity which, by 'working hard' and 'working smart', would bring many benefits, as expressed by this respondent: "Globalisation means being open and facing the world. It brings lots of changes in research and teaching to universities. The government encourages it and does not put any limits on it" (U2).

In China, nine universities have been designated by the government as those that should strive to achieve 'world class' status. Two universities – Beijing and Tsinghua – are widely acknowledged as the leaders and they receive significantly higher levels of resources. In the case study universities, respondents also felt the pressure to attain 'world class' status, although respondents at NU were more optimistic that their university could achieve this goal than those at NUST. For example, from NU: "Nanjing University should and can become the best university in China and compete as a world class university" (U5). However, from NUST: "This university wants to be well known in the world, but this is ridiculous, extraordinarily inane and meaningless" (T8).

Most respondents at NU associated globalisation with exchanges with other countries of teachers, and to a lesser extent students. One respondent noted that the university is

run by educationalists “who have studied in world famous universities such as Harvard, Yale, MIT, Oxford and Cambridge and therefore their views are really world views” (U5).

One group of NU respondents argued that in engaging with globalisation the primary focus should remain on China, for example: “I think we should deal with the Chinese economy first, and if the outcomes promote the development of the Chinese economy, that is the best reward” (U6) and “the real internationalisation should be to answer China’s needs first” (U10).

A significant number of respondents, especially at NUST, identified serious impediments to Chinese universities engaging with globalisation, in particular resources and language:

“If the university wants to be high level in the world, it should not only serve China but the whole world. The language we use is Chinese but when doing international communication, everyone needs good English. It cannot be bought by money. Language is the biggest problem. The second is financial problems.” (T2)

One respondent at NU turned the focus beyond finances and language to the curriculum: “The university does not do much on globalisation education. There needs to be reform of the whole curriculum and integrating internationalization into subjects. Globalisation does not only mean learning English” (U11).

One key lever used to forge the government’s goal of rapidly developing ‘world class’ Chinese universities has been changing policies on accountability in both research and teaching, as explored below. All respondents noted that there was virtually no accountability, or reward for service, either inside or outside the university.

### ***Accountability in research***

Here respondents reported on mechanisms used by their universities and governments to achieve accountability in research; the rewards and sanctions applied by their universities and governments to enhance productivity in research; and the key contentious issues they identified around the theme of accountability in research.

#### *Mechanisms*

One respondent from NU succinctly explained the rationale for introducing more rigorous mechanisms in the assessment of research productivity in the following terms: “if a university wants to promote its reputation, research must be emphasised because it can be seen [measured]. The reputation of a university has a direct relationship to its ability to acquire resources” (U2). Publications and research grants are the major mechanisms for measuring research performance in the case study universities, and throughout China.

In Chinese higher education, publications are ranked through a clearly defined hierarchy of journals. Journals in the English-speaking world are ranked at the top, with *Science* and *Nature* being considered the most prestigious. The second tier consists of other leading international journals which are seen as much more important than Chinese journals. Among Chinese journals there are national leading journals, although there are only a few in each field, and then the ‘core’ journals. At the bottom of the status hierarchy are provincial journals, which are often circulated nationally but are provincial based. This hierarchy was very well understood by respondents across both case studies, although it appears to be more rigorously applied at NU as it strives to achieve ‘world class’ status: “From 1992, our ex-principal emphasised competing within the international academy and our university encouraged academics to publish in overseas publications. The effect was immediately obvious. We led in publications for seven years in China from 1994 to 2001. Last year Beijing was first for the number of papers published in the Science Citation Index. We were second” (U3).

In China, both the *amount* and *source* of funds are considered when measuring research productivity. Research grants from the national level are the most prestigious (and weighted more heavily), followed by provincial funds. One respondent noted that: “The national science fund is counted five times. So if an academic has 100 000 Yuan national natural science funds it is counted as Y500 000 research funds” (T8). Most respondents noted that research funds were playing a relatively bigger role when assessing productivity in recent times as ‘the market’ was assuming greater importance in China. NU enjoys national prestige based on publications but it has more difficulty winning research funds because its strengths of humanities and social sciences attract less industry funding – that is, these disciplines are more distant from ‘the market’ for applied knowledge. By contrast, NUST receives large grants from the military for purposes such as weapons research. They receive enough money so that money was not seen as a problem at NUST.

China has established around 160 national research laboratories to foster research productivity and they are forced to compete with each other to retain funding. As one respondent explained: “Every 5 years they will be evaluated. The evaluation is very strict. For example, in 2004 all chemistry laboratories will be evaluated. The last will be eliminated through the contest. There is a 10% rate of elimination.” (U3).

### *Rewards and sanctions*

An elaborate system of rewards and sanctions has been developed to foster research productivity and thereby induce Chinese universities towards performing more competitively on the global scene. The majority of respondents identified the most potent rewards and sanctions for research grants and publications in terms of money for personal use by academics. In relation to research grants, one respondent noted that it is common for 25% of a research grant to be allocated to a personal account for private use (clothes, food, travel), and this explains why academics are very motivated to obtain research funds, especially from industry. Similarly, personal financial rewards for publications in prestigious English-speaking journals have been very sizeable, especially for the most prestigious journals such as *Science* and *Nature*. Financial incentives for publications have varied quite significantly between universities and also across departments within universities, as reflected in the case study institutions. One respondent at NUST explained: “If your paper is published in a core journal such as *Social Sciences in China*, some universities give Y100 000 reward but in our university the reward is only Y300” (T7). At NU, in one faculty: “if publishing a paper in first level periodicals the award is Y2 000, in the core periodicals it is Y800” (U6), but in another faculty: “an academic would be given Y1000 if published in that first level periodical, and for a core periodical it has just increased from Y200 to Y500” (U8). In general terms: “If the quality of the journal is higher, the money will be more” (U4).

However, more recently, across China, this system of financial rewards for publications and grants is being phased out, to be replaced by ‘position allowances’ (also referred to as ‘post allowances’), which include formalised contractual expectations of specified levels of research productivity (and teaching workload), with sanctions for non-compliance. One respondent suggested that this change may be in part because more academics were achieving international publications and it was becoming too expensive for institutions to continue to offer lucrative rewards. However, it must be recognised that still only a small percentage of Chinese academics publish internationally and for them the personal rewards (albeit a smaller percentage of their increasing salary levels) remain significant.

Although both case study universities have adopted ‘position allowances’, the requirements at each level of the system are slightly lower at NUST than at NU. If an academic is not publishing enough, it can mean that her/his position allowance may be reduced by 10-20%. For example, a professor may only receive a salary at associate

professor or lecturer level. However, such sanctions of financial penalty are relatively recent and still relatively rare.

There was almost unanimous agreement amongst respondents that the mechanisms for research accountability described above significantly increase the pressure on academics to aim to perform at a 'world class' level.

### *Issues*

Key issues to emerge from respondents about accountability in research included concerns about quality versus quantity of publications; lack of defined journal procedures for assessing papers for publication (especially the impact of *guan xi*); dominance of English-speaking journals and the subsequent effect on Chinese research; the short time frames for measuring productivity; and discipline tensions in research performance indicators, as evidenced below:

Every respondent expressed deep concerns about whether counting the number of publications (quantity) undermined their quality, as reflected in numerous quotes like the following:

"Without the stimulation of money they [researchers] could do it [publish] but it is still OK not to. It [money] adds pressure. The negative effect is that the quality cannot be guaranteed. The reason why they write papers is not because they want to write. They are not writing 'from the heart'. This is a negative thing." (T5)

"Actually people in China cheat. You can write it in one paper or you can write it in three papers. A lot of people find different ways to try to publish more." (U12)

"To pass the assessment to become a professor, one must have 6 or 8 articles, but it's only the number that counts. Some famous people may only have several articles in their whole life but each is a milestone. Those 'nasty' articles are useless. It is like forcing a gentlewoman to be a prostitute." (T8)

"The measure for evaluating research outcomes is quantification. It is from the logic of science. ... The spirit of the arts has been thrown away. ... The advantage is that it is easy for leaders to do assessments. The disadvantage is that it is easy to ignore the quality of outcomes. But if you say pay attention to quality, how can it be measured?" (U11)

The obsession with counting the numbers of papers academics publish is also problematic for postgraduate students, as indicated by respondents in both case study universities: "NUST students must have 3 articles before they acquire their doctoral degrees. Without them students cannot graduate and many require suspension for 5 or 6 years to obtain their degree" (T8). Three papers for doctoral graduation were also required at NU, but in some faculties (social sciences rather than sciences) recently they have loosened the three paper rule.

The lack of defined journal procedures for assessing papers for publication was a widespread concern for respondents. In particular, *guan xi*, the traditional Chinese system of relationship-building with those sponsors who will foster one's career, was considered to undermine and corrupt any formalised mechanisms for assessing the quality of papers. One respondent explained:

"The phenomenon of papers being published because of *guan xi* is very serious. In domestic publications if you do not know the editors, they will not even take a look. The process of sending a paper to several authorities in the field [peer review] is just

beginning in China, in the first level periodicals. It will be lamentable if the human relations factor [*guan xi*] also mixes into it and has a dominant position.” (T7)

Concerns were also raised by respondents about the observation that many Chinese journals only publish papers emanating from the highest ranking universities and others have little chance of being published, as illustrated by this example: “The main articles published by the *Journal of Computing* are from Tsinghua and Beijing [the top two ranked universities]. It is very difficult for other universities to be published” (T8).

Most respondents raised the issue of the unfairness of needing to publish in English to gain prestige for one’s research. They noted that Chinese research agendas and priorities are not always welcome in international journals and therefore Chinese academics have difficulty obtaining publications which are deemed to be prestigious. The flow-on effect is that relevant localised Chinese research becomes under valued.

Tensions between disciplines were evident over research performance indicators, as academics in science and technology are able to publish more in prestigious, English-speaking, international journals than those in humanities and social sciences. Further, these disciplines are more likely to be able to obtain funding from industry.

Competitive differences between disciplines also translate into competitive tensions between universities, as in these case study institutions where respondents at NU (with its emphasis on liberal arts and humanities) were more likely to be critical of the science/engineering style productivity measures which favoured universities such as NUST. There are other ways, too, in which counting publications fragments the higher education system and exacerbates competitive tensions, as emphasised by one respondent: “Originally an academic writes a paper to service academe. It is not for any specific university. Now it has become universities scrambling for outcomes” (T7).

Despite concerns expressed by respondents about the types of issues identified above, on the whole, academics in this study were more opposed to the specific measures employed than the general notion of accountability for research performance, and they argued that the methods of assessment should be more refined.

### ***Accountability in teaching***

A significant percentage of respondents noted that both governments and academics in China pay relatively more attention to teaching than is often evident in other countries. Within Chinese culture, teachers are highly valued. Lectures remain very teacher-centred, although there is increasing encouragement from governments and universities to adopt more innovative and student-centred styles of teaching and learning.

This section reports on respondents’ views about the mechanisms used by their universities and governments to achieve accountability in teaching; the rewards and sanctions applied by their universities and governments to enhance teaching quality; and the key contentious issues they identified around the theme of accountability in teaching.

### ***Mechanisms***

From the late 1990s, more systematic mechanisms for evaluating teaching performance were being implemented in China at the same time as research productivity was also being more strictly measured by governments. Yet, according to the large majority of respondents, despite the rhetoric of the importance of teaching, it is not valued as highly as research performance, and further, teaching evaluation is much more problematic than research evaluation. However, the apparent national and institutional priority of research over teaching is not uncontested by academics, as this respondent emphasised: “It is wrong not to pay attention to teaching if we want to be a ‘world class’ university. Teaching is the first thing” (U6).

Evaluation of teaching is conducted by authorities both external and internal to universities. Both national and provincial governments are directly involved in teaching assessments. Within universities, both students and senior academics evaluate teaching performance. Each year since the late 1990s, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the national government randomly selects a few universities for a teaching audit which includes teacher performance, portfolios, textbooks, student assignments, teaching records and examination papers. Similar teaching evaluations are also conducted by the provincial governments, and some cities like Shanghai also conduct their own teaching evaluations. The MOE does not restrict its audits to national universities, but also checks on provincial universities. Many respondents saw this as a reflection of the degree of control the MOE seeks to have over university teaching.

Within universities, mechanisms to assure quality in teaching are relatively similar across different universities. Student evaluations of teaching by undergraduates occur every year in every unit, and the evaluations are usually conducted by a centralised office of educational administration. There are no systematic postgraduate teaching evaluations. Each lecturer receives feedback from the administration with their teaching score, which is made public in some universities. In addition to student evaluations, senior university personnel, such as faculty deans, attend lectures (usually unannounced) to make observations. If a teacher is deemed to be under performing, a retired or senior professor with a reputation for good teaching attends lectures and offers advice.

The effect of teaching assessments was seen in negative terms by the majority of respondents. Further, a large percentage of respondents in both case study universities argued that maintaining quality in teaching had become more difficult as both workloads and class sizes had increased.

At NU, the majority of respondents believed that the university had a reputation for quality teaching, and several acknowledged that their teaching is made easier by the quality of the students: "The quality of our undergraduates is very high because their lowest score is the same as the Beijing and Tsinghua University [the top two]" (U6). NUST did not attract the same level of high performing students. Respondents in both case study universities noted a widespread practice in China: "There is a tendency for famous scholars to spend some time teaching undergraduate students. The government does not want them to spend all their time on research because they think that undergraduates should have the opportunity to communicate with prestigious scholars – it's important for them to develop and be successful" (U12).

### *Rewards and sanctions*

There are both national and provincial awards for excellence in teaching. National teaching awards are very prestigious but are fewer and very hard to get. There is also a 'politics' involved as respondents noted that the MOE tries to balance awards to different provinces and universities. Teaching awards usually only involve a small amount of money for personal use, and respondents largely saw them as token gestures compared to rewards for research grants and publications.

Sanctions for 'poor' teaching quality are relatively rare. At the institutional level, the MOE might force the university to stop recruiting students in particular programs if teaching is not deemed to be of a suitable standard, but this kind of sanction is fairly rare. For individual academics, in extreme cases, poor evaluations from students and senior staff could result in their removal from a teaching position to laboratory or library work, but this is also fairly rare. More often, if there are problems, senior university personnel discuss difficulties with the lecturer and put improvement strategies in place, although respondents noted that the specific approaches for improving teaching performance varies a little between universities. According to one respondent at NU "If you do not improve you are shown a 'yellow card'. If there is a 'teaching accident,' you are shown a 'red card'. If a

teacher is 15 minutes late it is considered a teaching accident. If there are several teaching accidents, the problem will be serious” (U5).

As with research, accountability for teaching is changing towards a system of penalty for ‘poor’ performance rather than reward for ‘good’ performance. Some respondents believe that if a teacher scores poorly on student evaluations and ‘peer’ observation, this will be reported to the faculty and that teacher is likely to have his/her position allowance reduced by 10-20%. Also as with research, respondents did not have a very clear understanding of how readily such sanctions are put into practice, given the relative newness of this reform.

### *Issues*

Key issues amongst respondents about teaching performance measures included the effect of *guan xi* (relationship building); the difficulty of defining and measuring ‘good’ teaching; the pressure from public shaming of teachers deemed to be ‘poor’; and the lack of quality control over postgraduate teaching/supervision.

For many respondents, there was no apparent relationship between teaching scores on formal evaluations (from students and academic ‘peers’) and rewards for good teaching, such as promotion. Again *guan xi*, where powerful sponsors can ‘make or break’ an academic career, was seen to significantly interfere with any attempts to render teaching assessment procedures transparent. For example, one respondent noted that recognition and promotion on the basis of teaching quality “It depends on how an academic builds relationships with the leaders. This is a very corrupt phenomenon” (T7). However, the phenomenon of *guan xi* in teaching assessments was mentioned much less explicitly and less often at NU than at NUST.

Notwithstanding the phenomenon of *guan xi*, the difficulty of defining and measuring ‘good’ teaching was raised as an issue by most respondents. Compared to research there were very negative reactions toward teaching evaluation mechanisms, but most respondents did maintain that some form of teaching evaluation is important. The validity and reliability of measurement instruments were in question, as well as the seriousness with which students and academic colleagues completed check lists of teacher competencies, as reflected in these quotes:

“The university asks students to tick the boxes. ... There are dozen of items to tick. I do not think that students take it seriously. Some of them are very impatient and do it carelessly. It is hard to see the extent of credibility it has.” (T8)

“We [academics] observe each other. Some teachers are very busy and they have no time to go [to the classes of colleagues]; what they do is ticking without observation and hand it in.” (T8)

A number of respondents commented on the pressure resulting from the public ‘shaming’ of teachers deemed to be of ‘poor’ quality. For example at NUST: “The scores given by students will be released in public every year, therefore teachers feel more pressure” (T6) and “ If students always give low marks then old teachers will listen to the lesson, and then everyone knows your teaching has problems” (T6). Even at NU where teaching evaluation scores are not publicly available: “For a teacher who does not teach well, firstly the teacher will feel embarrassed. Students would go to the educational administration office and say that if next term the subject is still taught by this teacher, they would not attend class. It is invisible pressure but stronger than visible pressure” (U10). This quote points to the importance of dignity and ‘face’ amongst Chinese academics.

The lack of quality control over postgraduate supervision was identified as an issue by most respondents. Postgraduate supervision is seen as research, not as teaching, so this



is largely ignored in teaching performance measures. In China, the relationship between the supervisor and student is considered to be 'like family' and therefore student complaints about supervisors are rare, although they will complain in private, but not in public." (U10).

### **Concluding discussion**

The first part of this concluding discussion raises key themes emerging from the China data and the second moves to more general conceptual themes.

Focusing first on **the 'case' of Chinese higher education**, there is clear empirical evidence from this study that the policy elite has actively and enthusiastically engaged with globalisation agendas, rapidly adopting the ideological dimension of globalisation to move towards market principles in the governance of the university sector. However, the Chinese goal of 'world class' universities is problematic for many, and it requires closer examination, especially as it appears to be related to a more limited 'gold standard' based on elite American universities (see also Marginson, 2003). Although there was widespread support from academic respondents in this study for the replacement of 'closed door' politics-oriented policies with market-oriented policies designed to enhance global engagement, the particular market mechanism adopted were heavily criticised by a large majority. Overall, competition, as the centrepiece of a market ideology, is becoming a primary *modus operandus* of the sector. However, the state does not appear to have rolled back in this new climate of marketisation, but arguably it has repositioned itself as 'market manager', steering via different mechanisms than in the past, but steering strongly all the same. It is through an elaborate, highly prescribed system of accountability mechanisms, in both research and teaching, that tight steering of academic work has been maintained, and even augmented, on the assumption that it will serve the national interest.

Increasingly in Chinese higher education, academics are being held responsible for their productivity in research and teaching through a form of contractual accountability, as they must achieve a certain quantity of publications and teaching workload which is tied specifically to their 'position allowance' and appraised annually. With additional rewards for publication in prestigious journals (and to a lesser extent for teaching excellence) in the form of personal monetary incentives, performance related pay has been a significant driver to rapidly embed a culture of performativity. For almost all respondents accountability mechanisms in research were accepted more readily than in teaching where measurement of performance was seen as more problematic. Even so, the apparent obsession with counting publications in a clearly defined hierarchy of journals, has brought deep concerns from almost all respondents about the valuing of quantity over quality. Further, the privileging of publications in English has brought deep concerns about preserving 'local' Chinese research and culture, especially in the social sciences, in the often overwhelming race to engage globally.

To further complicate accountability relationships in Chinese higher education, the newer, corporate, 'Western' managerial and market accountability mechanisms are layered on top of a more traditional accountability in the form of *guan xi* (relationship building with senior sponsors). Those who support the new market principles and accept new accountability regimes as more transparent, see *guan xi* as playing a corrupt role in the new system. These modified 'Western' and traditional modes of accountability operate under different sets of rules and the two are in constant tension, according to an overwhelming number of respondents. Thus, 'new' accountabilities have not replaced the 'old' ones, but they have coalesced into what, arguably, is an unstable hybrid of accountability relationships. Hence, while the Chinese national government has clearly set a path towards active participation on the global stage, there has been, and will continue to be, a need to navigate 'the local' within 'the global', especially in higher education which has been ascribed a central position in the global knowledge economy.

Moving beyond the Chinese data to more **general conceptual themes**, accountability, including quality assurance, is one of the major education policy domains which has grown to prominence with globalising new times. Accountability policies sit as the ‘flip side’ of policies which feature the rhetoric of devolution, decentralisation and deregulation. Together they operationalise a neo-liberal ideology in education, in what one respondent in this study colourfully referred to as ‘dancing in shackles’ to illustrate the characteristic ‘loose-tight coupling’ or ‘steering at a distance’. Despite the multiple and complex accountability relationships, many commentators have observed a strong transition towards market and managerial forms of accountability accompanying the ideological shift which privileges economic discourses (e.g. Ball, Vincent and Radnor, 1997). Ranson (2003) also identifies this shift in the neo-liberal age and maintains that these new accountabilities have a more punitive connotation and, consequently, they undermine the agency of professionals. He identifies the emergence of consumer, contract, performative and corporate forms of accountability over the last 25 years. As an alternative, Ranson proposes a democratic accountability where an inclusive democratic community actively participates in the deliberation over their differences to form a judgement about what is to be done. He believes that this process will lead to the return of public accountability – a consent of society – which must be continually tested and reaffirmed. He argues that neo-liberal accountabilities have actually displaced the public it was meant to serve and that trust can only be restored through the framework of public accountability that he describes.

Olssen et al. (2004) also pick up on the concept of trust which they, too, maintain has been eroded with neo-liberal accountability practices of monitoring, reporting, recording and surveillance. As with many other writers in the field, they distinguish external low trust accountability based on line management from internal high trust accountability based on professional responsibility, and they argue for a rejuvenation of the latter to foster democratic society. We would argue that given the existence of multiple and complex accountabilities in higher education, an hybridisation of different forms of accountability has a greater potential to empower a more diverse range of interest groups and individuals than any one form alone. To dislodge the hegemony of neo-liberal accountabilities, and create space for more professional and democratic forms involves the uncoupling of the technical and the ideological dimensions of globalisation, so that other (non-economic) possibilities for solutions to higher education public policy issues (and public policy generally) might emerge. The negotiation of the particular nature of the hybrid is of course not likely to be a straight forward process, and the dynamics will vary in the different contexts of different higher education systems. What is appropriate in various ‘Western’ countries may not be as relevant in the countries in our current study, for example.

This point about context specific differences returns us to our starting point of the complex, contested and often contradictory processes of globalisation. For us, the concept of ‘globalisation’, when it implies policy homogenisation, is too blunt an instrument to critically analyse these major reforms. Further, we would like to see more work done on the mechanisms of policy transfer between and within different countries, including amore detailed examination of the role of supranational organizations, international policy networks and possible global policy communities, in a context of globalisation. We would argue that there are still too few studies on globalisation processes grounded in detailed examinations of particular historical times and geographical spaces. We anticipate that as our project in PRC, HK and Singapore continues we might be able to shed more light on these issues– both empirically and theoretically.

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