

THE PROBLEMS WITH THE COLLEGE ELITE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Elite education program is conducted in many Chinese universities. Hitherto, there is a lack of empirical research that investigates the effectiveness of such programs. In this research, we conducted a case study research on the Cultural Foundation Strengthening Program of a major university in Nanjing City of China. We first reviewed the Western and Chinese literature on three issues: what defines elite education program; what has went wrong in elite education program; and what can we do to elite education program. To ensure the representativeness of our samples, we then used a stratified approach to select our samples. We conducted in-depth interviews with 9 year one students (6 females and 3 males), 12 year two students (9 females and 3 males), and 9 year three students (7 females and 2 males). At the end of the research, we found the following problems: chaos in the management system; chaos in the education system; problems in the mentorship system; problems with extra-curriculum activities evaluation; and problems with the academic expressway system.

Keywords: Elite Education Program; Case Study Research; Pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION:

The main mission for colleges is to educate and develop talents for the industry and country. It conducts education for both the elite and the mass (Trow, 1973). This is especially the case for research universities, which has the duty to nurture innovative scholars, highly trained managers, and high quality all-rounded talents. Colleges have to train all-rounded talents who can meet the demands of both the international and national markets.

From the end of the 19th century to the start of the 20th century, China's higher education industry has experienced a lot of changes (Li, 2014). It has gone through a century of exploration and development. China is currently heading toward the direction of transforming itself into an innovative country. Under such circumstances, colleges are not only a base for training talents; it also plays an important role in the construction of an innovative state (Cao, 2014). Thus, it is important for colleges to continuously innovate on their education system to ensure that they can train talents who meet the demands of the ever-changing market.

To meet the market's demand for both mass education and elite education, Chinese universities have started a series of elite programs targeted at gifted students. These universities require all fresh intakes of the year to take part in an examination, and they will enroll the group of best students of the cohort in the elite education program. These students will then go through an educational curriculum that is different from the other students who are not enrolled in the program.

Hitherto, there is a lack of empirical research that investigates the effectiveness of such programs. Thus in this research, we aimed to investigate the soundness of the prevailing elite education curriculum in China, and we aimed to give recommendations for colleges to consider for their future elite programs management. Toward this end, we conducted a case study research on one of the China's top universities in the Jiangsu Province. In specific, we conducted a case study research on their elite education program, which is known as the "Cultural Foundation Strengthening Program" (hereafter, CFSP; also known as *wen-qiang-ban* in Chinese). We believed that the findings of this research have important implications for college elite education programs in general, and we believe that it can provide the scientific bases for future educational management policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In this section, we will review the Western and Chinese elite education program literature. We divided this section into three parts: what defines elite education program; what has went wrong in elite education program; and what can we do to elite education program.

What Defines Elite Education Program?

China's education system has experienced a lot of changes in the recent decades (Li, 2014). To meet the country's increasingly diverse market demands, the Chinese universities provide both elite education and mass education. By elite education, we refer to the selective education system that is based on the aim to develop the knowledge, skill, ability, and ethics of gifted college students (Liu, 2003). And by gifted college students, we refer to the group of top performers in a batch of college intake. Elite education system is popular in higher education institutions (Trow, 1973).

Elite education program is different from the mass education program in two aspects: its pedagogy and ideology. In Wu and Chen (2008), the authors reviewed the systems of college elite education program. The authors found that such programs have the common goals of pursuing excellence and nurturing high-quality talents. Renowned universities in China have based their pedagogy, educational system, and management system on this common goal. They believe in the need to "strengthen the knowledge foundations of students, reduce the degree of specialization of students, and customize curriculums according to the needs of students", and the need for "a broad curriculum to build a solid knowledge foundation for students." Colleges make sure that students in the program are trained in both Arts and Sciences by making it compulsory for students to take arts, natural sciences, and social sciences courses in their curriculum. Some colleges have even converted the common "one major subject system" to a "multiple minor subjects system". They innovated on their pedagogies, and they used multi-prone approaches to develop their students. For example, they not only required their students to have good grades in courses, they have also set up many research funds to encourage students to engage in academic research. Some colleges have even implemented a mentorship system whereby faculties are assigned to students to assist them in their learning, personal development, and research competencies. Some colleges have pushed their customized system to the extreme by setting an elite student college.

On the other hand, Yan (2005) proposes that students in the elite education program must achieve the following goals:

1. Master the fundamental theories of management science and economic science;

2. Master corporate management skills, technological economic analytical skills, and social research skills; and
3. Master the way to engage in independence learning, to organize and communicate effectively, and problem solving and decision making.

What Has Went Wrong in Elite Education Program?

Some scholars in China have become aware that the elite education system might not be performing up to the expectations of those who have initially implemented it. Zhang (2004) proposes that the elite education system in China faces two problems: the lack of a conducive environment and culture that encourage elite education, the lack of an explicit goal to guide the education, the lack of devotion to create a supporting system, the lack of a supportive learning culture, and the lack of a set of supportive university policies. Wang and Jiang (2006) also propose that the elite education system in China is facing problems such as the lack of vision, over-simplistic curriculum design, rigid education management system, and the lack of devotion from the higher management.

What Can We Do for Elite Education Program?

Scholars have studied the means that colleges can use to improve the effectiveness of elite education program. For example, Ketcham and Sawyer (1955) studied the management of honors program. He advised that the number of students enrolled in the program should be controlled, students should undertake challenging tasks outside of the normal curriculum, and the courses taken by the students should address a manageable wide range of research topics. Langlois (1962) conducted a longitudinal research on the honors program of a college. The program adopted a seminar approach to classes. This approach has helped the students to learn, stimulated their interests, and improved their ability to understand and to analyze. Li (2007) proposes that elite education should: persist on the ideology that the elite education program was created upon, build a sound curriculum, build a strong team of faculties, control the quality of students admitted to the program, and manage the organization of students appropriately.

METHODOLOGY:

We adopted the case study research method for this research (Yin, 2014). We chose the CFSP program for the current research. The case was chosen because our focal university is one of the top universities in the Jiangsu Province of China, and the CFSP is the elite education program that they have started in 2007 (Luo, Zhou, Liu & Yang, 2007). To ensure the representativeness of our samples, we used a stratified approach to select our samples. We conducted in-depth interviews with 9 year one students (6 females and 3 males), 12 year two students (9 females and 3 males), and 9 year three students (7 females and 2 males).

RESULTS:

CFSP PROGRAM:

The focal university will conduct a general examination on its fresh intakes shortly after they have reported to the university. After identifying the cream of a year's fresh intake based on the results of the examination, the university will enroll this group of students into their CFSP program. Among the group of students chosen for the CFSP program, the university will choose the best of them for the academic expressway program (the program that allows the students to directly study their bachelor, master and doctorate degrees in sequence).

The CFSP program adopts a "2+2" educational approach. The lives of students enrolled in the program are separated into 2 two year terms. The university will isolate the group of students enrolled in the CFSP program from those who are not chosen for the first two year term. During this period of time, the students will go through a curriculum that is different from the other students. During this period, the students will not have the chance to choose their major. They have to go through a series of courses that covers a wide range of topics. Before the end of the second year, the student will get to choose their mentor. The mentor will guide them to work on a series of extra-curriculum activities (e.g. social investigation and academic exchanges). The mentor will also advise the student on what major should the student choose later in their university life. During this period of time, other than good academic grades, the students are also expected to apply for research funding and participate in academic competitions. They are required by the governing policies to complete a social research during their first year, and they have to publish at least one report, news analysis, or academic paper by the end of the first year. By the end of their second year, the students have to publish at least another one report, news analysis, or academic paper.

At the end of the first two year term, the students will have to choose their major, and they will be educated with the other students who are not part of the CFSP program. During the second two year term, CFSP students will undertake courses that are related to their majors.

The aim of the CFSP curriculum is to ensure that CFSP students will have a strong knowledge foundation for their future research, strong self-learning capacity, strong communication skills, and strong team work abilities.

THE CHAOS IN THE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM:

The students expressed that when they were first enrolled into the program, they believed that they would have access to a better learning climate, and they would have more resources and a better professional platform than the other students. Nevertheless, they were also aware that they would face a much more challenging curriculum than the other students. Thus, the CFSP students had the highest expectations on the better learning climate and the opportunities that were supposedly to be awaiting them. They believed that they would have access to good mentors, bursaries, chances for international academic exchanges, and better chances to enter into the master program when they have completed their bachelor degree.

However, as time passes, many students reflected that they knew little about what they should do and who should they approach when they faced problems. Because CFSP students are educated separately from the others, they could not even ask their friends for help when they faced troubles. For example, some CFSP students reflected that they had troubles even with simple issues such as where they should get their textbooks from at the start of a semester. A student from the 2014 intake lamented: "Nobody cares when I choose my courses. The youth corps committee teacher doesn't care. The head teacher doesn't care." A student from the 2015 intake commented: "Basically, I felt that I'm in charge of myself." Many students felt that they were in a state of anarchy. Many students have thus experienced many unnecessary stresses and pressures. This is bad for the development of the students, especially when they are at the freshman stage, a stage where they are experiencing a lot of uncertainties from their new environment.

THE CHAOS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM:

According to official documents, the education system of the CFSP program is divided into five levels. The first level is general knowledge (e.g. C++ language and physics). The second level is foundation knowledge (e.g. Chinese literature, macroeconomics, and microeconomics). The third level is subject foundation knowledge (e.g. humanities and management). The fourth level is specialized foundation knowledge (e.g. marketing and econometrics). The fifth level is specialized knowledge (e.g. consumer behavior and compensation management). This "pyramid system" has not only satisfied the market's need for general education, it has also fulfilled the needs of elite education.

While the structure of the CFSP program looks sound on prima facie, the "consumers" of the system thought otherwise. First, when asked whether they understood the policy regarding their curriculum, most students expressed "I don't have a deep understanding of the curriculum", and "I don't know about my curriculum." This was especially the case for year one students who expressed "I have no idea at all", and "I hope that there are teachers willing to give us a formal briefing on the system." A year two student expressed "the curriculum is quite complicated, and it is not clear." The comments from the interviews indicate that the curriculum is not clear from the perspectives of the students. This has caused many students to have difficulties in trying to "fit into" the curriculum. A student from the 2014 intake has aptly summarized the voices of many students: "Sometimes I'm busy like crazy, doing all types of meaningless tasks. I don't know why I have to do it. Before I have the time to think why I am doing something, I have completed it."

Second, when asked about the courses that they have to undertake, many students indicated that they would want to take some specialized courses from the other faculties if given the chance. They also hope for more "CFSP-special" courses, or more innovative courses, that they could take instead of those "boring courses" that they had taken. For example, some students lamented about one Chinese literature course taught by a teacher who had made the class "super boring and disappointing", and some students hoped that "there should be less low quality classes."

Third, while some students were told that they could choose their majors based on their interests, they could not really achieve this "dream" in the reality. Based on our interviews, the amount of specialized courses related to the faculty's majors that the students came into contact with during the first two year term was pathetically little. Some year two students hoped for "some formal introductory courses to majors that we can choose, some high quality classes, so we can know what the subject really 'feels like'." Many students commented that the

specialized courses that they had taken during the first two year term were merely “shallow introductions”. They could not “feel the charisma” of the subjects. These factors have caused the students to have difficulties in being able to make informed decisions on the major that they like to take at the end of the term.

In addition, some students believed that the curriculum was not focused enough, and the sequential arrangement of the courses was not reasonable. They felt they were being trained to become a “jack of all trades”. For example, some students commented: “Some courses should not be included in the curriculum! For example, logic and C++. We don’t need it in our future!”; “There are too many courses, we don’t have the energy.”; “We should drop useless courses like Physics.”; “The Linear Algebra course should be completed before the Probability course. We are doing the opposite!”; “When we finally have chosen our major, we felt that we have learned many useless courses, but we have not learned any useful courses yet.”; “Some courses are just too ‘shallow’. For example, the Macroeconomics course. It is just silly.”

Last, most of the courses graded the student solely based on the results of a written examination. The students felt that this appraisal system was not reasonable, and the system should be more “encompassing”.

PROBLEMS IN THE MENTORSHIP SYSTEM:

From the system’s perspective, CFSP students have the right to choose their mentor. However, this system has not been implemented faithfully. For example, students from the 2013 intake was appointed with a “random supervisor” at year one. This has caused some students to be allocated to supervisors who were not specialized in the topics that the students were interested in. For example, some students who were interested in Accounting were appointed a Management Engineering supervisor. Students from the 2014 intake faced similar problems. While they were given the chance to choose their supervisor, they were asked to choose their supervisors during year one, a time when they had little contact with any courses. When they discovered that they have more interests in some other subjects, they were “stuck” with the supervisor whom they had chosen the previous year. Students from the 2015 intake also faced similar problems. They were also asked to choose their supervisors during year one. Many of them commented: “I don’t know who to choose! I chose him just because he was the only one I knew!”; “I chose the wrong supervisor! He is from another department! He knows nuts about the specialization that I'm interested in!”

PROBLEMS WITH EXTRA-CURRICULUM ACTIVITIES EVALUATION:

The CFSP system requires the students to publish at least one report, news analysis, or academic paper by the end of both year one and year two. However, many students from the 2013 intake passed this criterion without completing any forms of report. None of the students from the 2014 intake knew about the system when they were in year one, none of them had contacted their supervisors to write any report, but they nevertheless have passed this criterion. While many students had tried to participate in research funding applications, little felt that they had learned anything. For example, some of the common remarks made by the students include: “The teacher gave me the idea, and I just wrote a paper by looking at how the other have done it”; and “We don’t know what we are doing. We are writing formal nonsense.”

PROBLEMS WITH THE ACADEMIC EXPRESSWAY SYSTEM:

Many students also remarked that the academic expressway system also has a lot of problems. For example, many students felt that they were discriminated. These comments were common among the students: “Why we have to work as hard, but we are not in the expressway system?”; “We are in the same class, but we have to fulfill more requirements than those folks who are in the system to get into master. This is not fair.” By right, the expressway system was meant to help more gifted students to succeed. Unfortunately, the perception of unfairness has mitigated the potential benefits that the system could have brought.

DISCUSSION:

In this research, we conducted a case study research on the CFSP education system. We found that while the management has designed the system with a lot of good intentions, the implementation and management of the system seemed to have fallen behind, and there are a lot of catch-ups need to be done. Colleges have to revisit their systems frequently and ask for the feedbacks of their students. For example, in this research, we found that the university has to first designate a person to take charge of the class and make sure that the students know who is in-charge of them. The person in-charge should also make sure that s/he will explain the curriculum of

the program to them clearly right from the start.

Second, the university has to reconsider the type of courses that they require their students to take. They should revise the list of courses included in the curriculum frequently to make sure that the knowledge imparted to the students can really meet the demands of the market. They need to be really willing to innovate on their curriculum to make sure that the knowledge that they teach their students can meet the expectations of the ever-evolving industry. Regarding courses that have less importance to the students' future specialization, such as logic and Chinese literature, the university should consider to either remove it from the curriculum or to combine these courses into a "synthetic course".

Third, the university should revise the sequential arrangements of its courses, and make sure that the courses are equally distributed across the four years of bachelor education. For example, it should ensure that the students must complete the Linear Algebra course before they are allowed to take the Probability course.

Fourth, the university should consider to lower the weight that its gives to examination when it comes to the grading of the students. For example, they should give more attentions on the continuous assessment component of the students (e.g. short term papers and presentations).

At the end of this research, we found that while the intention of creating the elite education system is good, the program might be performing at a level that is less than ideal. We also found that some of our findings bear some resemblances to the findings of previous scholars (e.g. Wang & Jiang, 2006; Zhang, 2004). This means that: 1. we have reasons to believe that the findings of our research are generalizable to the other universities in China, and our counterparts can benefit from the findings of our research; and 2. the Chinese universities have not really done much toward optimizing the elite education system over the last decade. In this research, we have taken the first step toward the optimization of the elite education system in China. We hope that our work can attract the attentions of scholars and practitioners toward the importance of the topic in perspective, and thus attracts them to study the phenomenon collaboratively.

Nevertheless, the findings of this research should be used with care. One potential limitation of our research is that our sample is made up of a female majority. One of the reasons for this biased sample makeup is because the majority of students who were enrolled in the CFSP program were females. In this research, we did not attempt to study the prevalence of this phenomenon in the other universities. Future research can consider investigating the prevalence of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, we believe that this factor will not adversely affect the validity of our research as the topic of interest of this research is the effectiveness of the prevailing elite education system, and not the influence of the sex of gifted students on the effectiveness of the system.

CONCLUSION:

In this research, we conducted a case study research on the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics. While we have focused on only one university in this study, however, in view of the similarities that exist between the Chinese universities, and the support our findings have received from the literature, we believe that our findings have important managerial implications for the management of future Chinese college elite education program. We hope that practitioners and scholars alike will become interested in the topic of elite education program reformation, and join us in the campaign of the betterment of future elite education program.

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