

## Educational transfer of liberal arts education into China: A case study from Chongqing

Hangyal, Zsofia ✉

Beijing Normal University, China ([hangyal.zsofi@gmail.com](mailto:hangyal.zsofi@gmail.com))

Teng, Jun

Beijing Normal University, China ([tengjun1983@bnu.edu.cn](mailto:tengjun1983@bnu.edu.cn))



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### *Abstract*

This qualitative study focuses on the experiential perceptions of stakeholders during the process of borrowing liberal arts educational programs from the Netherlands to China, in a recently founded undergraduate college in Chongqing, Southwest China. The study's main purpose is (1) to discover local actors' (teachers, students and other stakeholders) efforts in interpreting liberal arts education with particular attention to meanings, curriculum and pedagogy and (2) to explore whether and in what ways these individual claims conflict with the current institutional strategies. Some of the key findings reveal modified, 'culturally-absorbed' meanings of liberal arts education, unstable curriculum-structure and conflicting educational concepts. Based on these findings, we argue that the implementation strategies should be improved with respect to the stakeholders' standpoints and local realities instead of pursuing the requirements of a foreign educational model.

**Keywords:** liberal arts education; educational transfer; institutional strategies; China; Chongqing

## **Educational transfer of liberal arts education into China: A case study from Chongqing**

### **1. Introduction**

Education is a key to future growth, especially for rapidly developing countries such as China, a country that has been intensively improving its higher education to become an internationally competitive nation. To achieve this goal, educational policy borrowing from foreign countries caught greater attention in recent decades. The majority of research conducted on borrowing different educational policies has mainly focused on singular training programs or reforms, overlooking the problematic issue of importing a complex foreign educational system, such as Liberal Arts College. What kind of changes derive from the transfer, at the curricular, pedagogical, institutional and individual level? How is liberal arts education defined and adapted into the Chinese context and what are the local responses? The main argument of this article revolves around the importance of matching institutional strategies with local actors' diverse perceptions on how liberal arts education should work in China.

Breaking with the long-existing Soviet tradition of narrowly-specialized higher education, China seeks new ways to improve its universities with new policies and curriculum reforms (Jiang, 2005). In particular, an advancing tendency can be seen in reforming undergraduate education through the introduction of a broad-based curricular approach with general and elective courses to enhance students' literacy (Wang, 2014). Liberal arts education has the same curricular approach, though it places particular emphasis on student-centered classroom management and interactive pedagogy. China imported liberal arts education in 2012 with the help of Dutch educational experts. The first university to establish liberal arts programmes was in the city of Chongqing and another one opened its doors shortly after in Taigu. Liberal arts education has become increasingly popular in the Netherlands, where seven new liberal arts undergraduate colleges have been established in the last decade. This specific educational model of the Dutch liberal arts programmes was also implemented in other countries (Germany, Slovakia) before.

Chongqing's college for undergraduate studies is the result of a bottom-up educational transfer and it was modelled upon the Dutch Roosevelt University College. This private college is a rather small-scale institution as far as its academic capacity does: staff amounts to 25-30 teachers (including administrators) and generally 100-150 students enrol every year. Chongqing's university college was among the first universities in China to implement liberal arts programmes with major curricular and pedagogical reforms. Courses are organized within three major departments: Humanities, Social Sciences and Science and teachers are encouraged to use a more student-centered teaching style, one that focuses on interactive classroom activities that could possibly foster students' critical thinking, communication skills and social responsibility. According to the traditional Chinese undergraduate system, which tends to emphasize professional education, students need to declare their majors. However, after taking various subjects in the first year, they can change their majors in the second year. Further innovations include a tutoring system that assigns an academic advisor to each student, and the class structure, which is made up of relatively small groups (20-25 students per class) comparing to other Chinese undergraduate colleges. The management of the college, to ensure a more international environment for the students, has built up study exchange projects with foreign universities and seeks to hire teaching staff who studied abroad.

Given the novelty of liberal arts education in China, the transferred model had to be adapted to different educational and socio-cultural traditions. As a result, the implementation process led to several modifications of the new education mode. These changes reflect in the credit system, curriculum structure and, most importantly, in the pedagogical approaches where the confronting Chinese and Western educational traditions need to be balanced properly. After a brief study background, we will analyse stakeholders' perceptions on the most relevant challenges caused by the transfer and will argue about critical issues that need to be addressed by the institutional management.

### *1.1 Significance of the research*

This study requires attention for many reasons: firstly because liberal arts education in China is an understudied topic. Secondly, the research reports about a specific institutional initiative that reflects questions of internationalization-localization. At college level, the research, by highlighting important issues, contributes to the improvement of institutional strategies and student-faculty experience.

## **2. Background**

### *2.1 Liberal arts education versus general education*

Liberal arts education is a broad concept with many interpretations. Liberal arts education and general education are terms that are often used interchangeably, especially in the United States (Boyer, 1987; Levine, 1978). General education is not a new concept in China, as broad-based curriculum has been implemented into the undergraduate studies in more research universities in the past 20 years (Peking University, Zhejiang University, Beijing Normal University, and Nanjing University). However, the definition of liberal arts education builds on the idea of general education that only focuses on the breadth component of the undergraduate curriculum (Levine, 1978). Liberal arts education, as it is wished to be understood in the current study, emphasizes on a student-centered, dialectical education ('breadth and depth') that seeks to develop a more effective, interactive classroom management where 'the student is not a passive recipient of knowledge but an active participant in a common search' (Brann, 2000). If we see the case in China, the differences between general and liberal arts education can be further explored in a key study conducted by Wang (2014) on Peking University's Yuanpei College. The research confirms the missing link between general education's outcome goals (such as to educate well-rounded students) and the teaching-learning methods to reach them. In Yuanpei College, as Wang underlines, most professors follow the traditional way of teaching (lecturing), and students the conventional, Chinese way of learning (passive listeners). Interaction between professors and students in course teaching is mainly characterized by a one-way knowledge transmission (Wang, 2014, p. 149). So meanwhile the 'breadth' component is ensured by a broad curriculum with respect to the content, these general education courses lack the 'depth' in knowledge transmission given the infrequent interactions between faculty and students. However, the class-size of general elective courses is usually large at Chinese universities, so that discussion and interaction become unpractical.

### *2.2 Externalizing potential of the Chinese educational context*

How did China become receptive to foreign educational ideas? Cross-national attraction of different educational policies in China has gone a long way. Historically, the Sino-US educational exchanges, beginning from the 1980's had a strong impact on Chinese higher education reforms, and throughout the years these exchanges became the most important foreign academic relation for China (Jiang, 2005; Hayhoe, 1986). In fact, academic exchange is closely related to the educational transfer as it is defined as 'the action of reciprocal giving and receiving' (Jiang, 2005, p. 229). However, what comes in the first place to influence any educational reform related to borrowed ideas, is rather a development or change of educational philosophy. By turning to external references, the Chinese educational philosophy evolved towards a better preparation of students' intellectual abilities by expanding the curriculum with a more diverse, general education. The content-wise broad curriculum, inspired by US undergraduate colleges, laid the framework for Chinese liberal arts education. A significant influence on the educational ideology in favour of general (and liberal arts) education was exerted by a key report by Zhou Peiyuan, president of China Association of Science and Technology, Peking University. As a returned scholar himself, who had obtained his PhD degree in the United States, he introduced the core concept of 'talent cultivation'. In *Reflections after a visit to America: Issues on Chinese Higher Education Reform* (1981) he further explained the exemplary directions of the American undergraduate education that should be followed: the right to choose courses from various disciplines regardless of majors, and that every student should complete courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Zhou, 1981; Jiang, 2005, p. 232). Due to Zhou's prestige in the Chinese

academic scene, the report played a crucial role in promoting broad-based general- liberal arts education, thus endorsed the national acceptance of foreign educational ideas that greatly differed from traditional Chinese conceptions. From that moment on, ‘talent cultivation’, liberal arts and general education became interrelated terms in China and had similar, if not identical, meanings. The US-Sino scholarly exchanges, Zhou’s report and early reform plans are some of the key impulses that increased China’s receptivity for educational changes.

### 2.3 Critical reflections on educational transfer

There is extensive literature on the challenges of educational borrowing. For the most part, these studies focus on problematic issues associated to cases where the transfer process failed to achieve a successful implementation. In order to have a better understanding of these issues, some specific cases will be outlined. To begin, Davila and Keirns (1994), based on a case study on business development training program transplanted from the US to Mexico, assumed that the transfer had failed to produce the expected outcomes due to cultural differences. Although both the lending and borrowing countries shared the same ideas about the preferred outcomes of the training, divergent value systems and organizational structures made the implementation more difficult. As a possible solution, they suggested that the borrowing-lending countries should co-design the transfer together in order to keep value differences to a minimum by developing an effective transfer-protocol (Davila & Keirns, 1994, p. 89). The planning, which requires the collaboration of different interest groups, can identify differing viewpoints but also some of the ‘shared values’. Thus, it could potentially foster mutual understanding and continuous learning (Trist, 1980, p. 119).

McDonald (2012), who extensively studied educational policy transfers in developing countries, researched the possible ways of facilitating policy adaptation. In his view, the focal point of the transfer relies on the build-up of a ‘collaborative partnership’; an essential condition for the development of local ownership (McDonald, 2012, p. 1819). The partnership can take shape in various forms, from trainings to seminars or discussions. Looking into concrete educational transfer experiences, McDonald concluded that the training projects that were planned to facilitate the implementation generally overlooked the appropriateness of the policy for the local context and there was a gap in promoting sustained local ownership (McDonald, 2012, p. 1820). The trainings should focus more on the recipient country’s socio-cultural context and on the entire learning process of the involved actors instead of merely analysing the inputs and outputs (Ibid). The author also underlines the differences of cultural values: while the transferred policy put the emphasis on ‘competition, achievement, success and individualism’ (typically Western values), the Samoan schooling system valued ‘collectivism, interdependence and caring for others’ (McDonald, 2012, p. 1820). These contradictory characteristics of educational systems in developing-developed countries may make more difficult the indigenization of foreign ideas.

To conclude, the main problem of educational transfer lies in the differing cultural contexts, educational values and the creation of local ownership. Existing literature has already discovered some of the reasons behind contextual challenges. However the clues to answer the question: ‘*what does context mean to those involved?*’ were still limited (Rappleye, 2011, p. 415). Should we separate local actors from a given cultural-educational context? In our view, human beings and their context are rather inseparable; so context might only be relevant by individual interpretation and experience. Therefore present study’s research design - focusing on the issue of creating local ownership- addresses the following question: *how local actors, continuously involved with (and embedded into) a specific educational- cultural context, experience the transfer of liberal arts programmes?* The most affected stakeholders (teachers, students, administrators and other key actors) of Chongqing’s college gave valuable insights on the policy adaptation process. But, most importantly, their records shed light on different levels of personal commitment to the implemented educational model.

### 3. Research design

The methodology builds upon constructivist research paradigm in the means that present study relies on participants’ views on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2003). Therefore our study involves case study

research design focusing on Chongqing's liberal arts college with qualitative methods.

### 3.1 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework adapted Phillips and Ochs' (2004) widely recognized policy borrowing model and McDonald's (2012) updated version that underlines the importance of local context. As the perspectives of local actors are the vital points of the case study, the research concentrates on the stages of implementation and indigenization (see Figure 1). In addition, the framework introduces several subcategories in order to enhance purposive sampling: meanings, curriculum, pedagogy and institutional strategies. These subcategories could also facilitate a more systematic analysis by developing comparable categories.

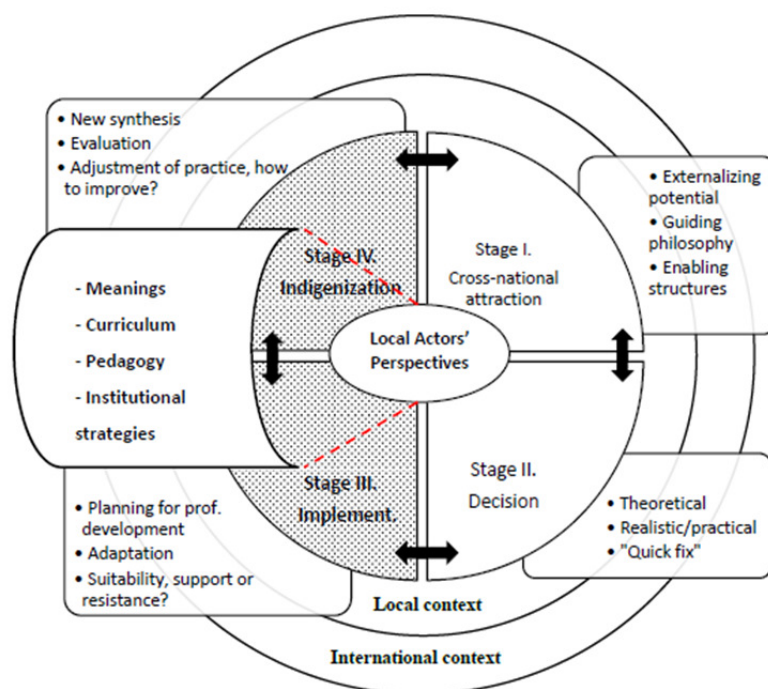


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for educational transfer analysis, based on Phillips and Ochs (2004) and McDonald (2012)

### 3.2 Methods of data collection

The research was carried out using multiple instruments to collect data. Secondary data were analysed to strengthen the contextual background of the liberal arts college (policies for undergraduate studies, curriculum, and booklet of the colleges). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, additional field notes and memos. 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, teachers, faculty members and other stakeholders of the college, both in English and Chinese language.

### 3.3 Sampling procedure

The sampling was purposive in the means that we wished to examine specific aspects of liberal arts education (meaning, curriculum, pedagogy, institutional strategies) and that the participants had to meet two criteria to be selected: alignment with Chongqing's liberal arts college and willingness to take part in the study. However, given the limited academic capacity of the college, almost all teachers and administrators were interviewed.

### 3.4 Data analyses

Processing the data employed qualitative content analysis following Mayring's approach, which is claimed

to be an appropriate method for case study research (Kohlbacher, 2005; Mayring, 2008). The strength of this method is that it involves the given context as a ‘latent content’ that needs to be considered in the process of category development (Ibid). The categories were developed and organized under the conceptual framework’s subcategories (meanings, curriculum, pedagogy, institutional strategies). The data will be thematically presented in the following section of the paper.

**Table 1**

*Interview participants*

| Participant | Gender | Age | Major/Department        | Duration of work/study | Exp. abroad |
|-------------|--------|-----|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Student1    | F      | 19  | English                 | Freshman               | -           |
| Student2    | F      | 22  | English                 | Junior                 | -           |
| Student3    | F      | 20  | Financial Management    | Sophomore              | -           |
| Student4    | F      | 20  | Financial Management    | Sophomore              | -           |
| Student5    | F      | 21  | Financial Management    | Sophomore              | -           |
| Student6    | M      | 20  | Financial Management    | Senior                 | -           |
| Student7    | M      | 21  | Electrical Engineer     | Senior                 | -           |
| Student8    | M      | 23  | Business Management     | Senior                 | -           |
| Student9    | F      | 20  | English                 | Freshman               | X           |
| Student10   | M      | 23  | Electrical Engineer     | Junior                 | -           |
| Student11   | M      | 23  | Business Management     | Junior                 | -           |
| Student12   | M      | 20  | Information Technology  | Freshman               | -           |
| Student13   | M      | 23  | Electrical Engineer     | Junior                 | X           |
| Teacher1    | F      | 25  | English                 | 1 year                 | X           |
| Teacher2    | M      | 32  | International Relations | 2 years                | X           |
| Teacher3    | F      | 31  | English                 | 5 years                | X           |
| Teacher4    | F      | 28  | Film, Art History       | 4 years                | X           |
| Teacher5    | F      | 33  | Film appreciation       | 3 years                | -           |
| Teacher6    | F      | 23  | Sociology               | 6 months               | X           |
| Teacher7    | F      | 30  | Psychology              | 3 years                | X           |
| Teacher8    | M      | 35  | Creative writing        | 3 years                | X           |
| Teacher9    | F      | 29  | Philosophy              | 1 year                 | -           |
| Teacher10   | F      | 45  | German                  | 3 years                | X           |
| Teacher11   | M      | 32  | Environmental Science   | 3 years                | X           |
| Teacher12   | M      | 29  | Film                    | 1 year                 | -           |
| Teacher13   | M      | 37  | Mathematics             | 8 years                | X           |
| Admin1      | F      | 31  | Administrator           | 4 years                | X           |
| Admin2      | M      | 24  | Instructor              | 2 years                | -           |
| Admin3      | F      | 26  | St. advisor             | 2 years                | -           |
| Admin4      | M      | 30  | Director of gen. office | 3 years                | X           |
| Admin5      | M      | 27  | Student’s advisor       | 1 year                 | -           |

*3.5 Reliability and validity*

In order to ensure validity, the research involved several techniques: (1) methodological triangulation for collecting data (interview, observation, field notes, document analyses, memos) (2) reflexive approach and (3) theory triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The study’s most important analytical perspectives to interpret the data were the composite processes of educational borrowing (Phillips & Ochs, 2004), the institutional logics by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) and theories of differing educational contexts (Forestier & Crossley, 2014). To enhance objectivity and validity of the findings, we considered important to follow Luttrell’s (2010) ‘reflexive approach’ that suggests to document in detail the data analysis processes and the choices made by the researcher, so that ‘some of what has been lost and some of what has been gained; the reflexive process of where, how and why particular decisions are made at particular stages’ are openly presented (Mathner & Doucet, 1997; Luttrell, 2010, p. 258).

## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1 Culturally absorbed meanings

There is a rich variety regarding the interviewees' perceptions and how they understand liberal arts education, how they organize different, often contradicting meanings into an individual interpretation. The diversity of the accounts can be explained by institutional flexibility, yet differences in interpreting liberal arts education can also result in quality issues of how the education practices are delivered to the classroom level. On the other hand, teachers' interviews show a strong institutional agency that has helped in the transmission of 'extended meanings', behaviours and teacher-student roles related to liberal arts. The meaning of liberal arts education therefore has acquired overlapping traits, often supplemented with cultural- educational alignments, that can be tracked by the frequency of several keywords: (1) *interrelated knowledge* (to connect many aspects of different subjects, the need of multiple perspectives to analyse one issue); (2) *human in society* (to learn how to be responsible, good citizen); (3) *student- centered education, teacher-student interactions* (to teach through engaging students into group discussions and make them develop their own ideas, to build a platform for them to think); (4) *individualistic traits* (to learn for self-improvement and personal development, becoming a 'whole-rounded person'); and (5) *freedom* (flexible teaching design, freedom to choose what to teach and what to learn, free selection of courses and re-selection of majors).

Within an educational transfer, it is important to find common points of the lending-borrowing countries that can facilitate the implementation of foreign ideas. In the case of transferring liberal arts education's core concepts, there is a specific trait that joined the educational values of both countries: the concept of citizenship or as it was often named by the interviews, '*human in society*'. Citizenship, thanks to many declarations of educational organizations, has been a global issue in the field of education for decades. Besides this, teaching students how to be responsible citizens in society is also a basic feature of the Confucian educational traditions. The concept of citizenship therefore can build a possible bridge between the differing educational contexts. Teachers' accounts emphasized the idea of 'how to be a responsible human in society'. However, they placed students' responsibilities in a broader context, defining them within different relationships: being responsible for other people, family, society (moral attribute, collectivism). Are these hidden gems of Confucianism? It is not by accident that many (faculty) respondents linked the meanings of liberal arts to responsibility and moral education. Looking back at the teachings of Confucius, most of his concepts focus on morality and the relationships between individuals and society: How to be a good person? What is the ultimate goal of education? According to Confucius, the goal is character cultivation (morality) and education should be about finding a proper balance between one's individual good (personal progress) and common good (how to be useful for the society) (Wang, 2014 p. 246). Traditionally, the most important role of a teacher in China is to cultivate morality in students. In addition, in Chinese language liberal arts education is often translated as '*Ren wen jiao yu*', which could be best interpreted as 'education in the humanities', but not necessarily for a Chinese person. The concept of '*Ren*', as many Chinese words, refers to thousands of meanings historically. According to Confucianism, the idea of '*Ren*' is one of the most idealistic virtues that means 'humaneness', 'being altruistic', responsible for caring for others. 'Wishing to be established himself, he seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.'<sup>1</sup> The extract from Confucius' Analects clearly demonstrates that personal development (one's education) is often linked to a certain 'collective' development, to the advancement of a broader society.

Turning to the meanings that were developed by participants, it can be assumed that some people understood *literally* the meaning of liberal arts education ('*Ren wen jiao yu*') and aligned some of the cultural meanings described above with their interpretations. This could explain why several words in the accounts can be related to 'Ren' and hence to Confucianism, such as personal behaviour, human in society, relationships with others, responsibility:

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<sup>1</sup>The Analects of Confucius, 6:30. Available from <http://ctext.org/analects/yong-ye/zh?en=on>

*'Besides focusing on studying, they need to know how to connect with society and how to communicate with others. The study in itself is not the most important thing.'* (Teacher2)

*'Students also need to develop the abilities to become citizens, like thinking for other people not just for themselves, be more responsible.'* (Administrator3)

Interestingly, if we contrast the academic staff's and students' ideas about responsibility, a clear difference can be seen: in teachers' views, a student's responsibility is often towards others and always within relationships, while for students it rather means one's own responsibility for him/herself. This divergence might arise from a generation gap, but the accounts in this sense refer to the contradicting ideas of individualism - collectivism, and to a changing value system versus the traditional values of China.

The meaning of liberal arts, in the sense of responsibility, absorbed ways of interpretation that are strongly aligned to local culture and educational traditions, but also influenced by foreign concepts. It raises the question: how should the institution promote a consistent liberal-arts meaning? How are contradicting educational values to be balanced? Based on the data, our suggestion is to focus more on the moral attribute of liberal education and on extended notions of responsibility that imply both individualistic and collectivistic traits. In this sense, institutional strategies could better integrate local actors' varying claims on interpreting liberal arts education.

#### *4.2 Pedagogy: Implications in practical application*

Quality issues of implementation, especially the teaching methods and classroom activities are still a major concern according to the students. Their accounts refer to the problematic adoption of the foreign ideas into the teaching practices. In their perception, teachers, despite understanding liberal arts education, cannot teach completely in line with its principles because their mindsets are fundamentally rooted in the traditional Chinese education. Implementing innovative, interactive pedagogy, as the classroom observation also proved, is a complex challenge. According to the Chinese educational system and traditions, teachers are used to exert absolute authority in their classrooms and to embody the most important source of knowledge (see Cheng's theory (2000) on 'culture of learning'; Xiao, 2006). There is seldom any group discussion led by students during classes, nor interaction between teacher and students. These conceptions, as many interviews showed, are deeply rooted both in teachers' and students' educational patterns, and these ideas are completely antagonistic to liberal arts education's core values.

The conflicting educational concepts became more obvious and foregrounded in pedagogical approaches: as many accounts showed, the problematic issues manifested as a certain tension between teachers' capacity and the requirements of liberal arts pedagogy. According to the college's innovative principles, teaching staff are required to make their lessons interactive and student-centered. However, the trainings conducted so far, aiming at preparing teachers for such situations, had not proved sufficient. Most of the teacher respondents stated that due to lack of experience in classroom management, they would need more professional trainings to implement new teaching methods. Based on the data, skill development should be enhanced for both professors and students. In particular, analytical and collaborative skills that are associated with liberal arts education need to be strategically transferred with further trainings.

#### *4.3 Curriculum and teacher- shortage*

For a private, third level college in the suburbs of Chongqing, it is difficult to attract teachers because they are more likely to prefer public universities (better welfare, ensured job security and better societal recognition). Therefore, the college has a constant teacher shortage and a limited capacity of teachers, so that it needs to hire some teachers from the main university campus. Against this backdrop, the college employs staff teaching both at the main campus and the college, each of which is guided by different teaching standards (some of them give lectures for 100-150 students and lectures need not be interactive, as it is extremely difficult, if not impossible). The teacher shortage results in difficulties to satisfy the requirements for implementing liberal arts programmes,



especially in the curriculum plan. As the data shows, one of the main problems is that the courses were designed according to the available teachers, without considering the needs of students or the college in general. Currently, the teachers are mainly specialized in Social Sciences and Humanities rather than Natural Sciences, so the course offerings fail to meet every student's needs. The curriculum is a good example of how the requirements of liberal arts education conflict with the college's current capacities. As it was expressed by many respondents, the curriculum is still unbalanced and inconsistent, and there is no systematic understanding of the reasons for setting up the present framework. Every teacher is responsible for his or her courses. Moreover as a teacher spelled out, 'things are just random'.

The question then arises as to how to improve the curriculum efficiently. Firstly, teachers and administrators should join forces to develop a general understanding of the aims and reasons for setting up courses. Designing the curriculum has been the administrators' task so far and interviews revealed that there is little collaboration between teachers and administrators in this respect. Creating a well-designed framework could be the first step to improve cooperation between different institutional units and to develop a systematic understanding of the curriculum at every single level. Secondly, the curricular content should be reformed professionally. It should not only state the available courses, but the goals and the means to conduct them. In this way, the course objectives should be explicitly stated, as well as the specific classroom activities that would foster skill development. Also, students should be informed about the kind of knowledge they will be able to apply after completing a given course. Finally, the curriculum reform should consider the local needs and students' background (students who used to focus on Sciences in high school would certainly need more diversity in Science's course offerings. Ultimately, the balance between the different departments' courses needs to be improved).

#### *4.4 Discussion on acceptance*

Whether liberal arts education is fully accepted and internalized in Chongqing's college is still an unanswered question for most of the stakeholders, from administrators to teachers, students, and other external actors, such as officials and leaders from the main university campus and parents. On the one hand, many people believe that pursuing a vocational education increases the chances of finding a job after graduation, and given the novelty of the model, there are neither measures nor results to confirm that liberal arts could compete with that. This tension between vocational (restricted to majors) and liberal arts (general) education has repeatedly been underlined in discussions about the balance of the courses, especially by students who express the desire to have more major courses. Even if teachers had absorbed the ideas of liberal arts at the time of the interviews, they were still not convinced about whether it was more beneficial than traditional vocational education. Various reasons were provided to express teachers' tensions in the acceptance of liberal arts education: characteristics of the Chinese education system (whereas undergraduate education is traditionally vocational), societal pressures, novelty-issues and problems in the credit requirements.

The education mode that the college has developed, based on studying in equal proportion liberal arts general courses, professional major courses and the so called 'perfection' education, is a compromise targeted at relaxing the complaints and tensions between professional and liberal arts education. However, this strategy has its drawbacks. The Ministry of Education mandates the number of credits that each student must complete in order to graduate. It is quite high (180- 200 credits) and there are also several obligatory courses that every student should complete (old- fashioned courses, remainders of the Soviet education era like Marxist philosophy). There is therefore a credit quota in major-related courses that cannot be changed. However, the institutional management wanted to stay faithful to the original Dutch idea of liberal arts education, which prescribed the credit ratio of liberal arts courses and major-related courses 100:60.

Liberal arts education inserted into this credit system results in, on the one hand, less major courses comparing to other colleges, and, on the other hand, in study overload for students, especially in the first year. The overload leaves students exhausted and leads to 'passive attitudes' in studying, as most of the teachers expressed. Novelty issues imply that there are no precedents of this kind of education within undergraduate studies, so that it is

difficult to check its usefulness and impact. How does liberal arts education reach its goal of developing well-rounded students? How should students' development be measured? Not only parents, but teachers and administrators often ask themselves these questions. So far there is no proper evaluation system to give feedback about the possible progress students have made: it creates doubts at the individual level (self-in doubts) and the societal level (acceptance of parents and main university). Doubts grow in the light of Chinese educational traditions that typically focus on aim-oriented education (test mentality and results) instead of an interest-led approach. People, especially parents, want to see achievement, progress and competitiveness. Their pressure to find a good job also drives back to the importance of vocational, professional education. The employability of the liberal arts graduates cannot be foreseen, as the first graduates will leave the college in 2016. All these factors harden the acceptance of the model and create tensions for the stakeholders involved. As the educational transfer literature defines, creating local ownership is one of the most important factors in implementing a foreign model; it needs specific institutional strategies to develop 'agents of change' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). As the data shows, there are already several 'agents of change' (teachers, students and administrators as well), however, all actors involved would need further reinforcement and professional development by the institution.

#### 4.5 *How to create effective institutional strategies?*

As it has been showed, many of the problems that arose during the implementation of Chongqing's liberal arts college resulted from structural burdens and from the diversity of the accepting educational context; a model that properly worked in one context, needed to respond to several structural requirements in a different one. Therefore, the transferred model of liberal arts programmes was modified to fit better the college's capacities. The extent of modification resulted in a completely different college model that barely resembles the borrowed one (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, p. 69; Kissane, 2001). However, this does not necessarily imply a lack of success of the borrowing institution, as success is highly determined by the institutional strategies that seek to improve the existing practices, teaching quality, the relaxation of acceptance issues, and to work on easing the structural constraints. In the present case, the institution created a working system of study plan, credit requirements and curriculum that adapted the framework for liberal arts education. The framework, in spite of some shortcomings, is rather complete and is evolving year after year. The transfer of the leading philosophy of liberal arts education has been successfully achieved: the empirical approach shows that students and teachers understood its core concepts. There are more practical issues to be addressed: how to deliver this mode of education to the classroom level in a more efficient way? In practice, institutional strategies need to target the improvement of teacher trainings emphasizing skill development and innovative pedagogy, the systematic curriculum reform, and the establishment of evaluation systems that ensure the identification of teachers' progress and student development.

With respect to skill development, the policy borrowing literature emphasized the importance of '*transfer of training*' that should ensure that the skills associated with the given adopted model come to be transferred as well (McDonald, 2012, p. 1824). How were skills transferred in the context at hand? Trainings were organised at the college with the involvement of foreign experts, yet for most of the teachers they were neither enough, nor efficient. The possible reasons behind this shortcoming could be the lack of time (many respondents felt that learning effective teaching strategies takes time and practice), the differing cultural context (what was considered by foreigners as an effective strategic approach in skill development might be less adaptable to another culture) or that cultural elements of the receiving country (the features of the Confucian heritage educational model) had not been considered when planning and conducting the trainings. Within the 'transfer of training' (application of knowledge, skills and attitudes learned from purposeful training), there should be a strategic way of implementing certain learning principles for all the actors involved (McDonald, 2012, p. 1824; Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010). Local characteristics and Chinese educational traditions should also be taken into account when planning the professional development. Therefore it is wished to involve more Chinese educational experts to lead further professional trainings who could better understand the challenges that Chinese teachers generally face in classroom management, and who have the same educational background in Confucian teaching methods. Furthermore, the trainings should focus more on teachers' higher-level thinking skills and the ways of their

practical application in classroom settings. As it was mentioned before, learning takes time and the establishment of the college had happened before the transfer of meanings and pedagogy could have happened for the teachers (the most important actors who should actually apply liberal arts education). This can be seen by the variation within the teachers' interviews: currently, at an individual level, all of them are at different stages regarding their own teaching practice; somewhere within the change *'from knowing nothing about this education mode to know something'*, and towards *'I might do it much better in the future'* (Teacher 4). Teachers are eager to change and improve their teaching methods; most of them had already made a great progress in implementing a more student-centered, interactive pedagogy. Apart from professional development, the institutional strategy should create teacher incentives and a complex evaluation system that can give proper feedback of the achievements.

#### 4.6 *Creating an evaluation system*

One of the most problematic issues is that there is no evaluation system, no strategic approach to measure the achievements that the college has gained so far. As the liberal arts education is an innovative transfer to China with no precedents, it is very important to create an own, high-quality evaluation system and establish a set of indicators that could trace the innovation process. According to the literature, the specific goals of educational evaluation are: (1) to monitor student outcomes at a given point of time; (2) to measure changes in student outcomes over time; (3) to monitor the impact of policy/curriculum innovation; (4) to generate information that can be used to further improve the system; (5) to assess the strengths and weaknesses and (6) to provide a valuable feedback for the actors involved (Santiago, 2012). For the present study, the institution should consider addressing two main evaluation goals: to measure the impacts and the outcomes of the transfer and to create new evaluation practices to monitor student achievement. Keeping in mind these goals how is an effective evaluation system to be created? Firstly, the academic staff and college administrators should agree on establishing educational objectives, short- and long-term goals to achieve. Then, they should regularly evaluate the progress of these objectives until they are achieved (Santiago, 2012).

On a broader scale, institutional strategies should also centre on measuring the achievements of the college: different approaches (surveys, questionnaires) could collect evidence from various sources, involving teachers, students and parents. The specific issues to be addressed depend upon institutional decisions; it can investigate teacher-student attitudes, learning objectives, understanding of liberal arts or opinions about the curriculum change. The involved actors' perspectives, after collection, should be analysed and evaluated in detail in order to create benchmarks for the system. Building up an evaluation system surely creates extra work for both administrators and teachers, but it also serves as an effective way to push the academic staff towards enhancing their understanding of institutional management and their skills in data analysis. Furthermore, educational experts and researchers can be involved for leading the evaluation process in the earliest stages. The evaluation system, by monitoring regularly the stakeholders' possible improvement or changing teaching- learning attitudes, can foster institutional management's motivation and efficiency in reaching the long term education goals. Nevertheless, evaluation needs to be carried out in order to disseminate the results and to enhance the societal recognition of the liberal arts programs.

How to measure student outcomes? Throughout the interviews that identified the main goal of liberal arts education in *'developing a well-rounded person and a self-directed learner'*, it became apparent that the achievement of this goal can hardly be measured by standard tests or exams. Some accounts even featured the future effects of this education mode and that its results might only manifest after ten or twenty years. However, some indicators should be developed to monitor students' progress. How can a deep understanding of students' achievement be gained? Is there a sensitive enough test to measure skill development, analytical and critical thinking? The evaluation strategy should assess a broad range of student achievements combined with the core aspects of liberal arts education: interrelated, interdisciplinary knowledge, analytical and critical skills, self-directed learner and leadership. Meanwhile, there are already tests worked out by educational experts that could be used for this purpose. Given the specific, innovative features of this education mode in China, we suggest developing an appropriate examination within the college. The house-examination, possibly organized once a year,

would focus on measuring students' skilfulness and independent thinking. A possible way to measure students' progress could be an essay-writing examination, where students, by choosing one subject from the different departments (Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities) are asked to develop an argument in the form of a creative essay with their original ideas. The grading guidelines need to be decided attentively. For example, students should be required to use cross-curricular knowledge in the essay, or combine real-world cases with the theories learnt during lectures, or develop a comparative study. The evaluation should be also directed towards students' skilfulness, especially regarding critical, analytical skills, innovative capability and how they apply and integrate knowledge in different settings.

## 5. Conclusion and limitations

Existing institutional practices need to be revised and regulated by a more systematic approach. As the liberal arts college is a new phenomenon in China, the most urgent task is to develop an evaluation system and a set of indicators that can reflect the achievements gained so far, also for providing valuable feedback to the actors involved. The feedback, apart from addressing shortcomings, can serve as a benchmark of progress: giving positive recognition of the innovative work that has been done so far.

One limitation of the present study is that it has only shown the Chinese liberal arts education phenomenon in a specific point in time (2015) and it is based on empirical research on one single case study. How the transfer will evolve in time, requires future investigation. It is important to note that the educational policy transfer is not a linear process, but rather a circular one that loses and gains certain aspects throughout time. Conducting the same study in different points in time might result in completely different data set. Moreover, the novelty of the liberal arts programmes in China poses further limitations, as there are no other institutions where a possible comparison of this educational model could be conducted. What about comparing this education mode with traditional undergraduate colleges?

In countries with large population, such as China, there are also implications regarding issues of *elitism*, that is, questions concerning who can afford such an education (private college) or who benefits from the implementation of this educational model. The *economic aspects* and impacts of this educational transfer, which would make up a very promising future research, have not been analysed in the current study.

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