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Problems and Solutions to the Undergraduates' Free Option Power of Learning: A Case Study of One "211 project" University in Central China

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Abstract

Students' free option power of learning is an important part of students' power of learning. It emphasizes respect for students' learning rights and freedom, so that students have a certain freedom of learning choice. In the theory and practice of Chinese higher education, undergraduates' free option power of learning has long been weakened and restricted by various factors. This study provides an understanding of the current situation of undergraduates' free option power of learning through 20 interviews with undergraduates from a university in Central China in a pilot project, whose purpose was to provide students with freedom in selecting higher education options. The interviews address three areas where students were given the option to select: (a) learning content, (b) learning processes, and (c) learning environments. Discussion follows on the problems experienced by Chinese undergraduates' in the free option power of learning project. Lastly, as China hopes to expand this project beyond the pilot, we advance recommendations to promote effective implementation of the free option power of learning of Chinese undergraduates, such as: (a) establishing sound laws to ensure the effective implementation of the power of students; (b) empowering undergraduates to have more choice to choose and change their majors; (c) carrying out the flexible program duration to let students have free choice of getting credits; and (d) establishing a sound and perfect transfer mechanism to let students have more choice of universities.

Keywords: *China, undergraduates, higher education, qualitative research*

Introduction

University is a kind of academic organization, which is made up of academic persons. Faculty and undergraduate students are the most important academic persons in a university. “Undergraduates are what decide university to be university rather than other distinctive groups” (Dong, 2012, p. 85). The university should be concerned with improving undergraduates’ higher education experiences. Part of improving their experience, in the Chinese context, is to provide them with more power and freedom to learn so that they can become more willing, efficient, and engaged learners. Students’ free option power of learning is an important component of their power. The university, attaching great importance to the students’ learning freedom is a reflection of the pursuit of academic freedom; undergraduates are the consumers of higher education, the free option of learning is their natural right.

It is pointed out in the Chinese government document, *The Guidelines of the National Program for Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development* (2010–2020), that the university’s most important work should be student cultivation, making each student develop actively and lively, respecting the law of students’ physical and mental development, and providing appropriate education for each student (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.1). “The establishment of the students’ status and the development of the students’ subjectivity depend largely on the ability of higher education professionals to empower undergraduates” (Li, 2004a, p. 93). In universities, learning is an indispensably important channel for undergraduates’ physical and mental health development. The importance of undergraduates’ power of free option in learning is self-evident.

However, in the policy and practice of Chinese higher education, the students’ free option power of learning has long been weakened. This problem is caused by many factors, such as: external conditions, ideological influences, and reality. External conditions include unavoidable objective factors, such as the belief that “undergraduates are all just transient guests in universities.” Ideological influences include the traditional belief that “students are just passive recipients of knowledge” (Li, 2004b, p. 16). Regarding reality, it is difficult for the power of students’ freedom of learning option to counter the two main powers present in Chinese universities - the faculty and administration, who still believe that the more power and freedom is given to student, the more their power is somehow lessened.

In recent years, attaching great importance to students’ free option power of learning is not only a trend of higher education reform, but also a key characteristic of the modern Chinese university system. With the further development

of Chinese higher education reform, students' free option power of learning is becoming more popular. In Chinese universities, this option is beginning to be of great importance to students. Han & Jin (2011) believe that university students' learning right is composed of the right of learning autonomy, the right of learning guarantee, and the right to enjoy learning outcomes (p. 65). Additionally, Fan (2012) believes that learning freedom is an important part of academic freedom. Learning freedom is composed of outer freedom and inner freedom. The inner essence of learning freedom is the freedom of thought. The most important thing for education is the guarantee of students' freedom of thought. The external manifestation of learning freedom is freedom of choice, including the right of course options, the right of professional options, the right of teachers options, and the right of school options (p. 16). Gao & Ji (2013) pointed out that "learning freedom is an extension of the concept of freedom in the education field, it is the human free spirit embodied in learning activities (p. 34). However, Zhong (2002) argued that "learning freedom does not mean the teacher is indulgent with students or completely not responsible for students. Freedom and authority, freedom and discipline, and freedom and guidance are inseparable in the process of learning (p. 8.).

In this research, a *211 project* university in central China was selected for our case study. In China, the *211 project* was initiated in 1995, after the approval of the Chinese government. It was meant to meet the challenges of the world's new technology revolution in the 21st century. The Chinese government concentrated power in all aspects of the central and the local governments, focusing on the construction of around 100 universities and key disciplines to make them reach the level of the world first-class university. It is the largest key project approved by the government in the field of higher education since the foundation of China in 1949. In 2015, China had a total number of 115 *211 project* universities.

This case study focuses on a key factor that is part of the *211 project* universities, namely undergraduates' free option power of learning. Additionally, we will explore the current situation and problems, and the recommendations for the free option power of learning of undergraduates in China.

Method

This qualitative case study addresses the research questions through conducting 20 interviews with undergraduates. The interviews were conducted from April to June, 2014.

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the current situations and problems of the undergraduates' free option power of learning in a Chinese university. The goal was to find some recommendations for the problems. To achieve these goals, we chose 20 students as participants in a *211 project* university (Dizhi University) in central China. The reason we choose this university was that it is a national leading university directly under the administration of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, and was among the first universities to join the national *211 Project*. Dizhi University maintains a balanced program of science, engineering, humanities, management, economics, law, education, and philosophy. There are 25,690 full-time students in Dizhi University. So the sample university is quite representative of popular universities in China.

Data were collected through structured interviews, follow-up emails, and document analysis. A sample of 20 students (10 males and 10 females) from 15 disciplines was selected. Convenience sampling was used, since the two authors worked and studied in Dizhi University.

Table 1 shows the demographic backgrounds of participants.

Table 1. Demographic background of student interviewees

Pseudonyms	Academic Majors	Grade	Gender
Anhua	Jewelry Identification	Sophomore	Female
Beiyun	Jewelry Design	Junior	Female
Caiwen	Automation	Freshman	Male
Dawei	Software Engineering	Sophomore	Female
Ejiao	Materials Science and Engineering	Sophomore	Male
Fuke	Physics	Sophomore	Male
Gecheng	Geology	Junior	Male
Hongzhi	English Language and Literature	Sophomore	Female
Iguo	Information Engineering	Sophomore	Male
Jiangwei	Jewelry Design	Sophomore	Female
Kexiao	Law	Sophomore	Female
Longmei	Electronic Information and Engineering	Junior	Male
Meili	Water Resources/Hydrological Geology	Junior	Male
Nongshan	Materials Chemistry	Sophomore	Female
Oyang	Art Design	Senior	Female
Pengchen	Mechanical Design and Automation	Senior	Male
Qingfen	Jewelry Identification	Senior	Male
Renlong	Software Engineering	Junior	Female
Songhua	Law	Senior	Male
Tengfei	Physics	Senior	Female

After the participants had been recruited, we interviewed them for about 30 minutes each. During the interviews, we asked each of them seven questions concerning the current situations and problems of the undergraduates' free option power of learning in Dizhi University. Our interview questions contained these areas: (a) the option power in learning content, (b) the option power in learning process, and (c) the option power in learning environment. The seven questions asked were: (a) Do you have the power to freely choose different types of courses the university offers? (b) Do you have the power to freely choose your major in the university? (c) If you find you are not interested in the major you have chosen, do you have the power to change it? (d) Do you have the power to freely choose your course schedule? (e) Do you have the power to graduate in advance or put off your graduation? (f) Do you have the power to choose classrooms in the university? (g) Do you have the power to freely transfer to another university? To clarify the participants' answers, we followed up interviews with discussions via emails. Some university documents about student power were also reviewed and analyzed.

Findings

The Option Power in Learning Content

The option power in the learning content is the students' power to choose what they want to study arranged by the university. Specifically, the option power in the learning content of this research includes: the power to select courses, the power to choose a major and the power to change the major.

The power to select courses. A course is commonly understood as a multi-discipline that students should study. The university should provide a wide variety of courses for undergraduates to select. They can freely choose the courses they want to study, this is the power to select courses freely. The interview question in this aspect is: "Do you have the power to freely choose different types of courses the university offers?"

Anhua, sophomore, whose major is **Jewelry Identification**, said:

I know the compulsory courses include professional compulsory courses and public compulsory courses. The professional compulsory courses are the courses that each school arranged according to their own professional requirements and curriculums. Also, the professional compulsory courses are the courses that students must learn. The public compulsory courses (also called general education courses), including the ideological and political theory courses, military theory courses, foreign languages courses,

computer courses, sport courses, etc. The elective courses are made up of professional elective courses and public elective courses. students can choose several courses in the professional elective courses, as long as they get the required credits. The public elective courses are provided for all the students in the university, the students can choose public elective courses freely.

Longmei, junior, whose major is **Electronic Information and Engineering**, stated:

The students cannot choose compulsory courses freely, whether they are the public compulsory courses, regulated by the university, such as Marxist philosophy and English, or the courses regulated by school according to the requirements of a major. But we can choose elective courses according to our own interests, as long as we complete the credits required by the university. But in my opinion, as there is not a variety of elective courses in our school, the elective courses fail to meet the needs of each student.

Gecheng, who is a junior majoring in **Geology**, said:

The compulsory courses are the courses that students must study according to their professional requirements. Students can choose elective courses freely, but these elective courses are too limited. So, there is a problem. If I want to study a course of computer science, I can't choose the course in the course election system. As the computer science neither belongs to my professional course, nor in the course election system, I cannot choose this course. Even if I attend this course, I can't get the credit.

As can be seen, the compulsory courses in Dizhi University are arranged in advance. Students cannot choose the compulsory courses freely. The elective courses are arranged for all students, students can choose their favorite courses, as long as they complete the required credits. But the number of elective courses is limited, they cannot meet the interests of most students. And students can only choose courses in a prescribed course election system.

The power to choose a major. A major refers to the principal subject which undergraduates study as a particular field. The choice of a major is often related to the future job. The power to choose a major means that undergraduates can choose a major according to their own interests and abilities freely. The interview question in this aspect is: "Do you have the power to freely choose your major in the university?"

Caiwen, who is a freshman majoring in **Automation**, said:

I chose this major just after the College Entrance Examination. At that time, I was muddle headed and I didn't know what this major was about. Now I am still at a loss.

Jiangwei, who is a sophomore majoring in **Jewelry Design**, said:

I thought jewelry design was very suitable for girls when I chose it as my major after the College Entrance Examination. Besides, this major requires higher grades and I just met the score requirement. Now I like this major very much.

Hongzhi, who is a sophomore majoring in **English Language and Literature**, said:

I chose this major just after the College Entrance Examination. At that time, I was not quite clear about the majors in this university. But I was very interested in physics. Unfortunately, my parents thought physics is useless for a girl and didn't wish me to choose physics as my major. Besides, my understanding of a major related to physics was very fuzzy then. So, I chose English Language and Literature reluctantly. But after studying this major in the university for two years, I found it was a mistake for my choice and everything was too late to change.

As can be seen, students in Dizhi University choose their majors just at the end of the College Entrance Examination. At that time, they do not quite understand how to choose a major. Besides, most of them have no ways to get some suggestions and advice on the choice of majors from professionals.

The power to change the major. The power to change the major means that students can change their majors freely at any time in the university. The interview question in this aspect is: "If you find you are not interested in the major you have chosen, do you have the power to change it?"

Ejiao, who is a sophomore majoring in **Material Science and Engineering**, said:

I think there is not so much freedom to change the major. There is only one opportunity to change the major in Dizhi University, i.e., at the end of the first year. To be honest, at the end of the first year, I wanted to transfer to jewelry identification, but jewelry identification has a demand for higher GPA (Grade Point Average) than that of other majors. So the change of the major is easier for students who are good at studying. If you want to change your major, you have to attend an interview by the school you want to go to. It is not so easy, only if you have passed the interview can you change your major. My GPA didn't meet the requirement of jewelry identification after the end of

the first year, so I lost the opportunity to change the major. I like jewelry identification very much, but I have no chance.

Gecheng, who is a junior majoring in **Geology**, said:

As far as I know, I don't think the change of major is easy. There is a certain restriction for the proportion of students. Also, there is a requirement for GPA and, it seems, an interview.

Longmei, who is a junior majoring in **Electronic Information and Engineering**, said:

It is certain that the change of major is not so free. You can't choose the major you like easily. If there isn't any relationship between the major you are studying and the major you want to choose, then it is very difficult for you to change your major. The university has a certain degree of freedom for you in this area, but it is very limited.

As can be seen, the students of Dizhi University can change their major at the end of first year. And there is only one chance. The change of major has certain requirements, such as the proportion of students, GPA and an interview. Only a very small number of students (5% of the total) are lucky enough to change their majors. It is difficult for most students in Dizhi University to change majors.

The Option Power in the Learning Process

The learning process refers to students' arrangement of courses and academic achievement. The option power in the learning process in this study involves two aspects: the power to choose the course schedule and the power to determine the length of studying.

The power to choose the course schedule. Courses can be divided into compulsory courses and elective courses. Because each student can choose elective courses freely, the time arrangement for each student is not the same, the order of courses for each student is also different. So the elective courses will not be discussed in this part. The courses we discuss here refer to the compulsory courses. The order of courses refers to the order of students' studying of compulsory courses. The interview question in this aspect is: "Do you have the power to freely choose your course schedule?"

Oyang, who is a senior majoring in **Art Design**, said:

The compulsory courses are arranged by the university, it is a rule that every student should attend compulsory courses. Students cannot choose compulsory courses freely.

Tengfei, who is a senior majoring in **Physics**, said:

Whether it is a public compulsory course or a professional compulsory course, the student is unable to choose the order of their learning courses. The public compulsory courses refer to the courses related to the basic knowledge, theory and skills that students from all the majors are required to master. The order of professional compulsory courses is arranged generally by the law of knowledge, that is, we should learn easy things first, then the difficult ones.

Meili, who is a senior majoring in **Water Resources and Hydrological Geology**, said:

It is certain that the student cannot choose the schedule of professional courses freely. In fact, the schedule of professional courses have already been arranged by the university. In my opinion, students don't need freedom in choosing the schedule of professional courses. As we have no idea which professional course should be learned first to lay the foundation for the learning afterwards, the arrangement by the university must be more scientific. The previous course is a foundation for the later one, it is impossible to change the order of these courses. The public courses, such as military theory and English, are arranged by the university. So students cannot choose the public courses schedule freely. For elective courses, I feel we can make our choice freely. We can choose the courses we are interested in freely, we can also choose the courses in different semesters according to our own learning progress, interests and ability. The arrangement of mine is different from many of my classmates'.

As can be seen, students in Dizhi University do not have much power to choose the compulsory course schedule. They usually make their course schedule according to the teaching plan of the university.

The power to determine the length of studying. In Chinese university, nearly all undergraduates complete their study within 4 years. The power to determine the length of studying means that students can have more choice about their study. That is to say, they can complete their studying within less than 4 years or more than 4 years. If they get enough credits in advance, they can graduate in less than 4 years; and if the students put off the time of getting enough credits, they can also

delay their graduation. The interview question in this aspect is: "Do you have the power to graduate in advance or put off your graduation?"

Kexiao, who is a sophomore majoring in **Law**, said:

Our university allows students to postpone their graduation. If a senior doesn't get enough credits in the senior year or the senior fails too many courses in the sophomore or junior year, he cannot graduate normally within four years. As for the student's graduation in advance, I have never heard of this.

This point can be reinforced in the interview with **Pengchen**, who is a senior majoring in **Mechanical Design and Automation** in Dizhi University:

I haven't heard of graduation in advance. But I know an undergraduate that has put off his schooling. He is in his sixth year in the university now because he has failed too many courses.

As can be seen, the students in Dizhi University have some freedom and some restrictions in the power of choosing the length of studying. During the four years of study, if the students do not get enough credits, they have to postpone their graduation (their study can be extended for two years at the most), but the students who get enough credits in advance cannot graduate in advance.

The Option Power in the Learning Environment

Learning environment refers to the external and internal conditions that support learners. Narrowly speaking, students' learning environment can be divided into the school learning environment, family learning environment and social learning environment. School learning environment refers to the buildings, teachers, teaching conditions, school spirit, study style, etc. These are the factors that affect students' studying. The option power in the learning environment in this paper involves two dimensions: the power to choose classrooms and the power to transfer to another university.

The power to choose classrooms. Classrooms refer to the place in which undergraduates attend classes. From the point of the class content, classes in university include theoretical classes, experimental classes and practical classes (internship). As different kinds of classes have different inherent requirements and objectives, teachers' teaching methods and students' ways of study are also different. Thus,

different kinds of classes should be carried out in different places. Theoretical classes are generally in the classroom, experimental classes are held in laboratories, practical classes (internship) are held in different places based on the major, such as a plant, field, primary and secondary schools, companies, etc. The classrooms in this paper refer to “theoretical classes”. The interview question in this aspect is: “Do you have the power to choose classrooms in the university?”

Iguo, who is a sophomore majoring in **Information Engineering**, said:

The classrooms in the Dizhi University are arranged by the university, you cannot choose the classrooms on your own. Students usually have their classes in the fixed classrooms and I think there is no need to have this kind of freedom.

Beiyun, who is a junior majoring in **Jewelry Design**, said:

The classrooms are scheduled in advance in the university teaching schedule. You cannot choose classrooms freely. Even if the faculty wants to change the classroom to somewhere else, they must discuss in advance with the staff who is in charge of the arrangement of classrooms in the teaching and management department.

Dawei, who is a sophomore majoring in **Software Engineering**, said:

The classrooms are arranged by the university in advance. Even the faculty have no power to change freely, we have no choice but to obey.

As can be seen, the students in Dizhi University have no power to choose classrooms. Classrooms are usually arranged in advance by the university.

The power to transfer to another university. The undergraduates’ power to transfer to another university refers to the fact that the undergraduates can transfer to another university to continue their study if they meet the basic qualifications and requirements of the university they want to study at. The interview question in this aspect is: “Do you have the power to freely transfer to another university?”

Nongshan, who is a sophomore majoring in **Material Chemistry**, said:

I have never heard that undergraduates can transfer to another university, but I know that the rules of transfer to another university in our Dizhi University are very complicated. There are lots of documents and requirements imposed by the provincial

administrative department of education. In my opinion, it is very difficult and complicated to transfer to another university.

Dawei who is a sophomore majoring in **Software Engineering**, said:

It seems that undergraduates' transfer to another university doesn't work in China. It is very rare, unless the student has special ability.

This point can be reinforced in the interview with **Qingfen**, who is a senior majoring in **Jewelry Identification** in Dizhi University:

It is certain that undergraduates cannot transfer to another university. How could it happen? There is no case of successful transfer to another university in Dizhi University. If you don't want to study in the university, you can go back to attend the College Entrance Examination again. If it is possible for undergraduates to transfer to another university, then everyone would like to go to better universities, such as Tsinghua Dizhi University and Beijing university. There is no doubt that there will be many problems. And it is not so easy even if the student wants to transfer to a university of the same level. My friend in another university told me there was one case of transfer to another university in his university, but it is very rare. And the university won't let us know how to operate it specifically.

As can be seen, the students in Dizhi University have almost no power to transfer to another university. In reality, very few undergraduates can transfer to another university successfully. There are many requirements and there is little practical validity.

Recommendations

The above survey analysis suggests that students' free option power of studying in Dizhi University in China is limited, which is manifest in the following aspects:

In terms of the option power in learning content, students cannot choose compulsory courses freely. They can choose their favorite elective courses freely, but the number of elective courses is limited. Students can only choose courses in a prescribed course election system. In other words, it is a kind of restrictive elective courses. Students choose their majors just at the end of the College Entrance Examination. They cannot get any professional advice on choosing majors so that

they make their decision blindly. After entering the university, although there is a chance for students to change their majors at the end of the first year, it is very difficult for them to change successfully because of the limitations concerning the proportion of the student numbers and GPA.

In terms of the option power in the learning process, students have no power to choose the learning sequence because compulsory courses are in accordance with the curriculum. The students in Dizhi University have some freedom of choosing the length of studying, but there are some restrictions. They can extend their studying (it can be extended for two years at the most) if they do not get enough credits, but the students who get enough credits in advance cannot finish their study and graduate in advance.

In terms of the option power in the studying environment, students have no power to choose classrooms because they are generally arranged in advance by the university. At the same time, students have almost no power to transfer to another university because the requirements and procedures of transfer to another university are very complex, and there is little practical validity.

Thus, how to guarantee the free option power of studying for undergraduates becomes a main problem we have to face. Useful solutions need to be found to guarantee student power.

- **Establishing sound laws to ensure the effective implementation of student power**

On the one hand, undergraduates' power should be included in the law. The establishment of concepts cannot be done by simple influence and infiltration, which also needs effective support of strict laws. From the national point of view, if the legality of student power is written in laws, the implementation of student power can be imperative. "Guarantee provided by the legal system is the most stable and mandatory. When student power is shielded by the extruding from the traditional binary power, student power should be guaranteed by the mandatory of legal system." (Dong, 2012, p. 82). As can be seen, including student power in the law not only makes its legality undoubted, but also makes it mandatory. It is the greatest guarantee for the effective implementation of student power.

On the other hand, from the university point of view, the university should lay down relevant institutions and systems to ensure that all aspects of student power can be implemented effectively. Also, how to put the free option power of studying into the academic power system and how to make the free option power of studying accepted by the academic power should be focused on.

- **Empowering undergraduates to have more choice to choose and change their majors**

As we all know, Job-specific Human Capital Theory holds that the mismatch between students' personality and majors will affect the efficiency of education investment. In order to promote the best practice of undergraduates' free option power of study, the requirement that students choose their majors before they are enrolled in university should be changed. Also, the time and frequency for undergraduates to change majors should be changed.

Firstly, the time of choosing majors should be put off till the end of the first year. In order to let undergraduates familiarize with majors, the university must arrange a course about "the introduction of majors" in the first year. This course should be taught by the teachers responsible for professional instruction in each school. Besides, this course should be compulsory for all freshmen, which can make students have a general understanding of every major. Thus, students will no longer blindly choose their majors at the end of the first year.

Secondly, the time and frequency for undergraduates to change majors should be changed appropriately. When some undergraduates study a major for a period of time and lose their interest, we think the university should give them more choice to change their majors, which should be their basic power of studying.

- **Carrying out a flexible program duration to let students have free choice of getting credits**

The Chinese university should loosen the restrictions of program duration and provide students with respect and trust, allowing students to graduate in advance when they get enough credits. They should be also able to extend their studying.

The reform concerning the program duration may initially result in some inconvenience and confusion for university management, but flexible program duration reflects respect to undergraduates and the symbol of modern university.

- **Establishing a sound and perfect transfer mechanism to let students have more choice of universities**

The Chinese university should establish a specialized organization responsible for students' transfer to another university and develop relevant policies and regulations to make some detailed provisions about students' transfer.

What is more, the university should establish a communication channel concerning students' transfer among universities. Each university can set diverse standards for academic achievement, overall quality and other aspects according to their own requirements. Applicants who meet these standards should be accepted.

Besides, this organization is also responsible for answering students' questions about transfer to another university, providing some necessary help when students encounter difficulties in the process of transfer to another university, making clear regulations concerning specific requirements.

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