Linking up with and Orienting to Development:  
New Direction of University Institution Researches

Lian-Sen WANG*  
Institute of Higher Education, Shandong Women’s University, Jinan, P.R. China, 250300  
School of Tourism, Shandong Women’s University, Jinan, P.R. China, 250300  
Research Center for Higher Education, Shandong University, Jinan, P.R. China, 250100  
*liansen@sdu.edu.cn

Key words: University institution, University development, Institutional school.

Abstract: Institution is an important factor restricting university development. Since the previous and current theoretical and practical circles mainly discuss university institutions in the perspective of university institutions and do not have an in-depth understanding on or pay enough attention to the relationship between institutions and university development, this article advocates carrying out “university institution research linked to and oriented to development” to deeply investigate the relationship between university institutions and university development, the mechanism of influences of university institutions on university development, the mechanism of transition of university institutions along with university development and the mechanism of innovation for university development and build ideal institutions appropriate for the development of Chinese universities of different types and design institution innovation plans tending to ideal institutions.

Institution is an important factor restricting university development. Since the previous and current theoretical and practical circles mainly discuss university institutions in the perspective of university institutions and do not have an in-depth understanding on or pay enough attention to the relationship between institutions and university development, this article advocates regarding the institution theory as “a perspective, a method and a research paradigm”[1], interpreting university development from the perspective of institutions, deeply exploring the relationship between university institutions and university development, the mechanism of influences of university institutions on university development, the mechanism of transition of university institutions along with university development and the mechanism of innovation for university development so as to expand the modern university institution researches and enrich university development theories and higher education management theories and build ideal institutions appropriate for the development of Chinese universities of different types, and with that as reference, explore the current “institution gap” of development of various universities in China and raise institution innovation plans with strong operability to consequently ensure and promote the scientific development of various universities in China, as well as the construction of a strong higher education country.

University Institution Research: History, Current Situation and Prospect

Institution is an important factor restricting university development. It has existed in human society for a long time and played an extremely important role. However, it was in recent years that people have understood it and realized and fully recognized its function or role—the neoinstitutional economics dated back to the 1930s is the first to be realized, immediately followed by the neoinstitutional politics. Starting from institutions, the neoinstitutional economics and neoinstitutional politics deem institution as a perspective, a method and a research model for discussing development issues, obtaining huge academic achievements marked by the Nobel Economics Prize, which makes the institution theory be recognized and become a prominent subject
It moves from the economic field to not only the political field, but wide fields such as educational field.

Western researches on university institutions were developed in two fields at first. The first field is researches focused on the school-running idea of universities. Because of the liberalism tradition in society, the basic concept of university institutions (university autonomy and academic freedom) are taken for granted, university institutions are considered as coming along with ideas, and the establishment of ideas means the establishment of institutions. The second field is researches focused on the national systems and policies regarding higher education. In recent two decades, with the vigorous development of neoinstitutional economics and neoinstitutional politics, the researches on university institutions under the perspective of governance have risen.

The previous researches on university institutions were frequently conducted by employing the traditional organization theory and sociological approaches of management and they focused on the “relatively closed system” inside universities; the university under the perspective of governance “is more like an open system” and related researches concern all internal and external stakeholders. In addition, the difference between the university research under that perspective and general institution researches is that governance perspective concerns the “self-enforcing” of institutions, and takes self-enforcing as a standard of institution validity.

Modern Chinese universities were transplanted from the west, so the previous university institution researches mainly focused on how to “follow the form of Europe and establish our own universities”, which is a “major issue in front of us at present”. The University Order by Cai Yuanpei, the Memorandum of Association of Tsinghua University by Mei Yi-qi and the Ten-Year Plan for Fighting for Academic Independence by Hu Shi are not only practical university institutions, but university institution research achievements. After the establishment of New China, the special historical environment made universities become affiliated bodies of government and the university institution researches were unnecessary and impossible.

After the reform and opening-up, especially after the promulgation of the Higher Education Law, university institution researches gradually became hot spots. Experts such as Yuan Gui-ren (2000)[5], Wang Ji-sheng (2000)[6], Pan Mao-yuan (2001)[7] and Wu Da-guang (2001)[8] published articles to rethink and review the current university institutions in China and advocate and appeal for “establishment of modern university institutions with Chinese characteristics”. After that, many discussions on the history and reality, idea and operation, direction and mode of Chinese and foreign universities’ institutions are springing up, such as investigations on the historical evolution of Chinese and foreign universities’ institutions since the Middle Ages, suggestions on the spiritual principle, ideal mode and path strategy of modern university institutions, thinking on the innovative subject, direction and mode of university institutions, exploring to university institutions of property rights, researches on universities’ governance structure and related governance mechanism, etc.

Through the existing university institution researches, it can be found that in terms of research paradigm, the discussion on university institutions are in the perspective of university institutions and do not have an in-depth understanding on or pay enough attention to the relationship between institutions and university development. In terms of research subject, there are more researches on macroscopical and “superficial” institution problems but fewer researches on microcosmic and “deep” institution problems, as well as more researches on practical institution issues but fewer researches on theoretical institution logic. In terms of research content, there are more researches on university institutions in the aspect of idea but fewer researches on university institutions in the aspect of operation, as well as more initial optional researches on university institutions but fewer follow-up innovation researches.

In terms of research perspective and approach, there are more single-perspective researches but fewer interdisciplinary researches, as well as more “integrated” researches without discrimination but fewer “distinct” researches aimed at different types of universities. Those shortcomings and imperfections leave wide space for the future research. The following research fields may become a frontier land which can yield significant innovation achievements: ① With “institution” as means and “development” as purpose, investigate the deep relationship between university institution and
university development. ② Linked up with and oriented to university development, explore and analyze the university institution transition mechanism and innovation mechanism. ③ Design distinctly ideal institutions for universities of different types and design multi-path for the institution innovation of Chinese universities.

University Institution Research Linked to and Oriented to Development: A Preliminary Design

Core concept

(1) University development. The survival state of universities can be described as follows: the “university affiliated person I” (teachers as holders of human resource and the auxiliary personnel, management personnel and logistical personnel providing service for them) take the initiative in carrying out knowledge activities (teaching knowledge, creating knowledge, saving knowledge, using knowledge and spreading knowledge) and cultural activities (culture edification, cultural innovation, cultural inheritance, cultural spreading and cultural exchange) by use of the material resources provided by the “university affiliated person II” (government as the public principal, students, donators and other fund providers). The quantity increase and quality improvement of knowledge activities and cultural activities imply the development of universities.

(2) University institution. Institution is a “method, means or tool” for guaranteeing and promoting social development, and people “use it to restrict, regulate, adjust and unify human activities, and to determine, strengthen, protect and develop some relations.”[9] University institutions are rules for regulating and guiding the behaviors of the “university affiliated persons” and establishing and regulating the relationship between “university affiliated persons” with materials, as well as the “relationship among people” between them. Generally, it is believed that the institution includes written formal institutions and unwritten informal institutions. The institution mentioned in the “university institution research linked to and oriented to development: a preliminary design” refers to the former; i.e., formal institution. With the border of university organization as a line, university institutions can be divided into “outward institutions” and “inward institutions”. This research mainly focuses on the latter.

(3) Institution analysis. The institution theory is formed through the “the interpretation of development from the perspective of institutions” and it is “a perspective, a method and a research paradigm” for discussing development issues.[10] The research interprets university development, investigating the influence of institution to university development, and why and how do university institutions change and have innovation facing sound and sustainable development of university by use of institution theories and from the perspective of institution.

Research content

The “university institution research linked to and oriented to development” tries to answer the following four groups of questions in sequence, totally 21 questions in number.

Group I: What is the implication of university development? Are institutions important for university development? If yes, how do institutions play their important role? Do institutions have limitations? If yes, how to overcome them?

Group II: Are there any ideal institutions appropriate for university development? If yes, what kind of institutions are they? Are they “universal” institutions, regardless of university types? Are they “ultimate” ideal institutions, without any need of change?

Group III: Will university institutions change? Do they need innovation? Why? How do university institutions change? How can we make university institution innovation successful? Can university institutions be transplanted? What are the role and function of informal institutions, such as culture, in institution changes and innovation?

Group IV: What is the mode of current university institutions? Is it ideal? If not, shall we let it evolve passively or shall we actively build it artificially? How will it evolve? How shall we build it?
Correspondingly, the research consists of the following four parts.

Part I: Research on the relationship between institutions and university development. This part answers the questions of Group I and it belongs to the theoretical research and basic research. It covers the following contents: definition of institution, classification of institution, relationship and difference between informal institutions (such as culture) and institutions, connotation and process of university development, role of institutions in development, limitations and appropriateness of institutions, influences of institutions on university development and the influencing mechanism thereof.

Part II: Research on ideal institutions of university development. This part answers the questions of Group II and it belongs to the theoretical research and basic research. It covers the following contents: connotation of ideal institutions, spirit and principle of “universal” university institution, “uniqueness” of institutions of different universities (research universities, teaching universities, public universities and private universities).

Part III: Research on university institution transition and innovation. This part answers the questions of Group III and it belongs to the theoretical research and basic research. It covers the following contents: reasons, mechanism and modes of university institution transition; motivations, purposes, condition, opportunities, subjects, direction and modes of university institution innovation.

Part IV: Research on the current Chinese university institutions. This part answers the questions of Group IV and it belongs to the empirical research, practice research and application research. It covers the following contents: current situation of existing institutions of research universities, teaching universities, public universities and private universities in China; the gap with their ideal institutions; subject, path, mode and principle of implementing institution innovation and making up the “institution gap”. In consideration of the “insufficient” “super-stable structure” of Chinese universities’ institutions, analyze the reason why “inductive transition” cannot become the initial driving force, explore the field, strength and timing sequence of “compulsory transition” which replaces the “inductive transition”, as well as pursue the operation mechanism of “inductive transition” after the “compulsory transition” breaks through the institution gap and the correction function in the “compulsory transition” in running, which is a meaningful and challenging research direction.[11]

Research route

(1) Research means: Firstly, literature research method. Collect and sort data regarding university development and university institutions in domestic and overseas educational circles by modern means. Secondly, field investigation method, interview method and questionnaire method. Gather the information related to the institution construction states and effects of different universities at home. Thirdly, case study method. Select several different representative universities at home and abroad and deeply analyze their institution construction states and effects, transition and innovation processes in detail. Fourthly, comparative method. Carry out a comparative research on the institution constructions states and effects, transition and innovation processes of domestic and overseas universities of different types.

(2) Research tool: General theory tools of philosophy, law, organization, management, economics, biology and specialized institutional economics (containing neoinstitutional economics, economics of law, property-rights economics, etc.), neoinstitutional politics, institutional school and organizational behavior.

(3) Research approach: The history analysis and logic analysis are combined; theoretical research, empirical research and practice research are linked; basic research and application research are corresponding to each other.
Future Direction and Preliminary Views

Future direction

The objectives of university institution research linked to and oriented to development are as follows: Firstly, linking to university development, provide a theoretical interpretation framework of relationship between university institutions and university development and of university institution transition mechanism and innovation mechanism; secondly, oriented to university development, provide a practical solution of ideal institutions and institution innovation of Chinese universities of different types.

In the research process, the key and difficult points to be overcome are as follows: exploration of mechanism of influences of university institutions on university development, theoretical analysis on reason, purpose, conditions, opportunities, subjects, direction and mode of university institution transition and institution innovation, research on uniqueness of institution construction of universities of different types such as research universities, teaching universities, public universities and private universities, exploration of relationship between informal institutions, such as university culture, and university institutions and its role playing in institution transition/innovation.

The possible innovation points of “university institution research linked to and oriented to development” are as follows: ① Analyze the mechanism of institution influences on university development and then raise the conceptual category of “institution appropriateness”. ② based on different development goals, development directions, development contents and development backgrounds of research universities, teaching universities, public universities and private universities, distinctively design the respective ideal institutions appropriate for university development. ③ based on and oriented to the sound and sustainable development of universities, raise the theoretical interpretation framework and practical solution of university institution transition/innovation.

Preliminary views

(1) Institutions can guarantee and promote the effective development of knowledge activities and cultural activities of universities by regulating behaviors, adjusting relationships, maintaining order, keeping stability, solving conflicts and strengthening cooperation and consequently promote the smooth development of universities. Therefore, institutions matter.

(2) However, due to the contradiction between the inherent monotonicity of institutions and behavioral diversity, the contradiction between prescription and selectivity, the contradiction between stability and variability[12], as well as the particularity of functional activities of universities, institutions shall be appropriate and need continuous innovation.

(3) Due to the rigidity of existing institutions and inertia of cultural tradition and customs and conventions, university institution transition mainly shows the pattern of “natural evolution” and the feature of “gradualness”. On the basis of “natural evolution”, it is essential to give play to the initiative of “university affiliated persons” to carry out “rational design”. In order to ensure the success of university institution innovation, the “rational design” shall “proceed from the reality and go according to conditions”[13].

(4) Ideal university institutions are institutions which are most favorable to guaranteeing and promoting the realization of knowledge and cultural functions of universities. Since the number, content, background of functional activities of universities and their primary motivation are different, the development of universities of different types needs different institution designs.

(5) In comparison with the “ideal institution”, there are institution gaps in the development of Chinese universities, which shall be made up, and continuous innovation is also necessary with changes in objective conditions and subjective factors.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by Independent Innovation Foundation of Shandong
University (Grant No. IFW12116), Humanities and Social Science Research Project of Ministry of Education (Grant No. 15YJA880069), and Research Project of China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Society (Grant No. 2015Y11).

Author in Brief
Lian-Sen WANG (1972-), Ph.D., Associate Professor, Institute of Higher Education, School of Tourism, Shandong Women’s University; Research Center for Higher Education, Shandong University.

References