

Title : Understanding Discretion for Cultivating International Students' Intercultural Competence: Case Study of a Local University in Chengdu

Research Overview : This study selects a public university in Chengdu as a case and clarifies the mechanisms by which faculty and staff use discretion in implementing the policy objective of “developing international students’ intercultural competence,” as well as the current challenges they face.

Purpose of Study : The purpose of this study is to clarify how university faculty and staff use discretion to translate a policy objective into practice. The policy objective examined in this study is the goal of “cultivating international students’ intercultural competence,” as stated in the *Standards for the Quality of Higher Education for International Students in China (Trial)*, which proposed by China’s Ministry of Education in 2018, for enhancing the quality of education for international students. This objective has supported intercultural education for international students; however, its ambiguity (the absence of clear implementation pathways and evaluation criteria) has created challenges in implementation.

Research Methods : This study adopts a case study as its research method and selects a public university in Chengdu, western China, as its case. This university has more than 10 years of experience in enrolling international students and has incorporated the cultivation of international students’ intercultural competence in its internationalization strategy.

The study conducted semi-structured interviews with ten faculty and staff members involved in intercultural education for international students at the university. These participants include administrative staff from the international students' office responsible for coordinating international student education, faculty leaders who plan and implement intercultural education initiatives, course instructors, and student advisors responsible for extracurricular activities.

The theoretical framework of this study integrates Loose Coupling Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory. This combination is grounded in a bottom-up approach to policy implementation research and incorporates recent developments in street-level bureaucracy scholarship, particularly the distinction between "discretion-as-granted" and "discretion-as-used". Loose Coupling Theory is applied to analyze interdepartmental linkages within the university during policy implementation, thereby explaining how faculty and staff obtain discretion. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory is used to analyze how discretion is actually exercised in practice, to understand how policy is translated through faculty and staff interpretation and action into intercultural education.

The analytical framework of this study is derived from a systematic review of research applying Loose Coupling Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory to higher education policy implementation. It identifies factors that may influence both the granting and the use of discretion and also informs the design of the semi-structured interview questions.

Interview data will be analyzed using thematic analysis and coded with NVivo 15.

Results : This presentation focuses on how faculty and staff use discretion during the implementation process and finds that discretion is used in deciding whether to implement the policy objective, in designing implementation plans, and in allocating resources.

Furthermore, the study finds that all interviewees chose to implement the policy objective by embedding the cultivation of intercultural competence into existing disciplinary courses, language courses, and extracurricular activities. During implementation, not only did faculty leaders provide as much financial support as possible, but instructors and student advisors also invested substantial time and effort to deliver higher-quality education for international students.

Also, the study shows that discretion is jointly shaped by organizational factors (curricular time capacity and training opportunities) and individual factors (experience and values).

Discussion : This study focuses on two main aspects.

First, it seeks to contribute new insights into the use of discretion. The findings indicate that “value of alignment with policy objectives” is an influencing factor that has received limited attention in prior research. This value reflects the strong influence of the Chinese government in higher education and encourages faculty and staff to take policy objectives seriously and implement them, even though their content is ambiguous. In addition, the study finds that state authorization can enhance the legitimacy of staff actions, enabling them to tactically use the policy mandates to obtain additional support.

Second, the study examines two key challenges encountered during policy implementation. The first is that insufficient training leaves faculty and staff without adequate professional knowledge to design effective implementation plans. This finding corroborates prior research suggesting that excessive discretion can undermine implementation outcomes and indicates that policymakers need to increase the use of capacity-building instruments. The study further finds that global competition surrounding the internationalization of higher education compels universities to prioritize the scale of international student enrollment. This, in turn, lowers the quality of incoming students, increases pressure on the total instructional time available within the curriculum, and ultimately constrains the resources available to faculty and staff for the dedicated development of intercultural competence. Under such conditions, the embedded implementation approach described above represents the most realistic and sustainable choice at present.