

Factors Affecting the Sustainability of Sino-American Educational Ventures in Mainland China

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ABSTRACT: *The scope of this study is to identify the main factors that influence the sustainability of Sino-American Educational Ventures (SAEV) in Mainland China. SAEV ventures have been a new global trend since the Chinese open door policy in the late 70's. These ventures are comprised of Chinese and American institution forming degree programs in mainland China. Sustainability for this study meant creating world-class institutions with a Chinese educational mantra known as sine qua non, meaning education for security, sustenance, and economic expansion. The study attempts to examine factors such as perceived external prestige, discordant educational rating systems, government policies, and intercultural communication. In addition, the analysis includes the review of institutions that have succeeded and failed in these ventures and the sustainability efforts employed by these institutions. Finally, the paper provides an insight into ways of mitigating these factors, thereby the sustainability of Sino- American Educational Ventures.*

Keywords: *Sino-American Venture, Perceived External Prestige, Intercultural communication, Government Policies.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of educational globalization has created a wave of international partnerships between universities around the world. For many of these institutions, it is to brand themselves and to gain a competitive advantage in the international forum. The purpose of this study is to focus on partnerships between U.S universities and Chinese universities in mainland China. These partnerships are called Sino-American Educational Venture (SAEV). In the past 30 years, there has been an extensive educational transformation in China, initiated by Chinese Leader, Deng Xiaoping. This was the precursor for China's open door policy and the vanguard of SAEV in mainland China (Borgia, Bonvillian, & Rubens, 2011). In 2005, Nottingham University became a pacesetter in these types of ventures. Since then, several U.S institutions, such as Yale University, University of Michigan, University of Denver, Florida Coast Gulf University, Eastern Michigan University, Lawrence Technological University, Washington University, and Stephen F. Austin State University have developed similar partnerships. This wave continued, and by 2006, over 1,400 foreign higher educational joint programs were established in China. This was in addition to 3,000 + universities serving 29 million students in that country (Gu, 2013).

These international ventures meant three things to both Chinese and foreign institutions; (a) an opportunity to gain advanced knowledge by combining both the American and Chinese models of education; (b) an opportunity to diversify, by creating international character around the globe (Buela-Casal, Gutiérrez-Martínez, Bermúdez-Sánchez, & Vadillo-Muñoz, 2007); and(c) an opportunity to develop China both economically and scientifically. These benefits have not come without limitations. As intimated by Ding's (1997) study of Sino-American Educational Ventures, the major issues affecting the sustainability of SAEV are the different approaches to program implementation, intercultural communication, and the Chinese political system. This study will further explore the effects of perceived external prestige and discordant educational rating system on SAEV sustainability. Better understandings of these factors will create the emergence of mitigations that would effectively increase the sustainability of SAEV in mainland China.

1.1. Nature and Significance of the Problem

The effects of perceived external prestige, discordant educational rating system, intercultural communication, and government policy on the sustainability of Sino-American Educational Ventures in Mainland China have not been sufficiently examined. Furthermore, the study warrants an examination of how these factors affect student satisfaction in SAEV.

There are few things to consider when venturing into foreign business partnerships. It is important to note that, in the Chinese culture there are nuances reflected in language communication and information dissemination. This can create a loss of meaning and cause miscommunication of venture objectives. As such, the program goal becomes ambiguous and sustainability is limited (Bradley & Griswold, 2011). Beyond the issue of language is the dissonance that emanates from the differences in cultures between the U.S and China. The challenges for

many foreign universities become how to blend the American culture of individualism and the Chinese culture of collectivism (Zhang, 2009). A 2007 study conducted on employee work values hypothesized that Western influence on Chinese individuals created openness to change and increased work motivation. However, those without the Western influence were less aggressive and more secure in their present yet an uncomfortable state. These values transcend beyond the work environment into the classrooms. As the relationships between students and administrators in SAEV become disconnected, limiting program success (Jaw, Ling, Yu-Ping Wang, & Chang, 2007).

It is equally important to research the role of perceived external prestige (PEP) on SAEV sustainability. PEP in this context means how Chinese students self-identify with their university of choice. The better the university or the partnering institutions the better they believed they would be perceived by others (Willis, 2010). This has created a hindrance to the longevity of foreign institutions in China because some of these universities lack the notoriety needed to gain student attraction. This perceptive view stems from the different rating system between the U.S and Chinese institution. This discordant rating system has since become a major concern in the collaborating of universities in SAEV. This is the reason why several foreign institutions have lost to their counterparts in the highly competitive Chinese market (Buena-Casal et al., 2007).

This research would contribute to the model of Sino-American Educational Ventures by examining through literature whether perceived external prestige, intercultural communication, discordant educational rating system and government policies has an impact on the sustainability of Sino-American Ventures in mainland China. This would be significant to future Sino- American Educational Venture in mainland China.

1.2. Background of SAEV

The Chinese State Education Commission was established in 1985, for the planning and development of education reform and for the delegation of education authority in China (Zhao & Baldauf, 2008). In an endeavor to create standards that are globally competitive, China's Ministry of Education initiated a classification of universities in 1995 and called these the 211 schools. These universities consisted of approximately 112 schools that would focus on the socio-economic development of the country into the 21st century (Ying, 2011). By 1998, President Jiang Zhenin selected from that group a handful of world-class institutions to promote science and technology as a precursor for China's educational global presence. These institutions were classified under a system called 985 (Lixu, 2004). Since then, over 39 universities have now been included in the 985 classifications. Within these 39 universities, are the C9 schools that are the U.S equivalence of Ivy League universities such as Yale University, and Harvard Univ

ersity. Some of their Chinese counterparts included, Zhejiang University, Peking, University and Fudan University, just to name a few (People's Daily, China, 2008). Alongside this educational globalization were the challenges to sustainability. This manifested in the consistent retreat of foreign institutions from China due to lack of knowledge (Ding, 1997). The programs within these ventures are twofold. There are the 2+2 transfer student programs and 3+1 transfer student programs. The 2+2 meant that Chinese students would complete 60 credit hours at their home institution and another 60 credit hours with the partnering American institution. While the 3+1 meant the Chinese student would complete 90 credit hours at their home institution, and 30 credit hours with the partnering American institution (Borgia et al., 2011). The Vice Chancellor of NYU Shanghai, speaking on grounds of Education reform, encouraged foreign institutions to collaborate with their Chinese counterparts by understanding the process of engagement at the epochal stage (Yang, 2012). This is pivotal to doing any business in China. The idea of implementing Sino-American Ventures in an unfamiliar territory must be coupled with a great understanding of not only rating systems between organizations that evoke prestige and perception, but sensitivity to culture, language nuances, and government policies.

II. INFLUENCING FACTORS

2.1 Perceived External Prestige

Perceived external prestige is the self-identification of individuals to their organization. This means how people view themselves in relation to their organization and how society perceives them. The study by Willis (2010) indicated that the reputation of a foreign university was an identification influence for a Chinese student and a subject of perceived prestige within their community. This meant the way people viewed a foreign institution was paramount to them. Willis (2010) further intimated that a high- ranking foreign or domestic university translated into better job opportunities. Furthermore, it was observed that the reason students embraced the idea of Sino-American educational venture was to gain prominence among their peers, and as such, prudence is applied in selecting universities with world accreditation. White (2011) believed that Chinese students begin the ranking process of universities very early in secondary school. Students often researched top Chinese colleges before alternative or overseas colleges and then Sino- American educational ventures. Their decision factors included; institutional budget, scholarship ability, and competitiveness. Alon and Van Fleet (2009) theorized that foreign universities looking to establish sustainable ventures in China must be cognizant of China's huge

competitive market, and unless their program is uniquely different, they would not succeed. It was suggested that a well-designed SAEV included programs that annexed both the Chinese concept of economic development and business management, awarding students a global advantage. Sustainability is an anthesis of student satisfaction and this was evident in the partnership between FGCU (Florida Gulf Coast University) U. S A, an AACSB accredited university and Nankai University a China's 985 universities). This partnership developed problems due to lack of student enrollment as Nankai was already in partnership with more prestigious foreign universities (Zou, Zhao, Mason,& Li, 2015). This is one reason many foreign institutions are losing their base in China. Amid the sprout of global technology, the ratings of many foreign universities are now available online. This has made it easy for the Chinese institutions to pre-determine what school to collaborate. The goal of these Chinese institutions is to collaborate with more prestigious U.S institutions, leaving the lower ranking U.S institutions with limited Chinese institutions to partner. The universities with lowered ratings have created concerns for those Chinese universities vying for international recognition. It was not until FGCU collaborated with a regional (lower level) Chinese institution like Yantai University, that they were sustainable in China. This has become a feasible option for many foreign institutions (Zou et al., 2015). This is an indication that Chinese students exercise a great deal of discretion in school selection. This selection process will yield to great referrals, therefore, student attrition, and SAEV sustainability.

2.2 Intercultural Communication

Language, a function of communication, is always a problem for any partnership between two different cultures. Communicating a clear plan objective in SAEV is directly proportional to its success and sustainability (Yuan, 2009). Many foreign institutions enter blindly into SAEV without a proper understanding of the Chinese language and style of communication. There are nuances within the Chinese culture that are reflective in communication and information dissemination, and if not properly observed, venture sustainability would be compromised (Bradley & Griswold, 2011). Hall (1999), suggested that Chinese communication style across cultures were twofold; (a) High context style meant internalization of expressions and thoughts. (b) Low context style meant the vocalization and outward expression of feelings. This is why understanding the Chinese culture required a working knowledge of Mandarin and the idiosyncrasies that accompany the language. Julius and Laventhal (2014) postulated that in the quest for sustainability, personal interaction in the form of shared cultural observances with foreign entities, helped to bridge the communication gap in SAEV. Hence, foreign institutions inquiring about SAEV have been encouraged to employ the services of intermediaries, to help mitigate the issue of intercultural communication. The role of an intermediary would be to establish and communicate clear achievable goals that would eliminate ambiguity and promote sustainability (Borgia et al., 2011). Mustapha (2014) buttressed this point in a study of the challenges of implementing a degree program in China. The study revealed that the context of language and communication accounted for 94% of the concerns that materialized in the venture. This became why many students in the venture were unable to align their requirements with the institutional objectives. In addition, the lack of understanding between students and administrators had produced an atmosphere of low student performance. Though originally student incompetence was to blame, however, it was due to the metamorphosis of poor intercultural communication during program formation.

2.3 Discordance in Educational Rating Systems

In developing SAEV, it is important to consider the educational rating systems between the U.S and the Chinese university. In doing so, consideration should be given to factors including but not limited to; student recruiting technique and size, student exchange, dual degrees merging, faculty exchange (human capital), politics and economics, and budgets (Alon& Van Fleet, 2009). This comparison is the most crucial aspect of SAEV. The difficulty lies from the different countries and their distinct ways of ranking universities. The Chinese higher institution consists of 3,000 + universities serving 29 million students (Gu, 2013). These universities are grouped into 5 stages:(1) the national key universities, e. g. Peking University; (2) the national other universities, e.g. Beijing institute of Technology; (3) the municipal universities, e.g. Beijing Technology and Business University; (4) the private universities, e.g. Beijing City University; and (5)vocational colleges, e.g. Hangzhou Vocational and Technical College (Nces.ed.gov, 2015). On the other hand, the U. S system of higher education consists of 4-year colleges,2-year colleges, private institutions, and technical colleges. Within the 4-year colleges are the Ivy League schools such as Yale University, Harvard University, and Stanford University. Unlike China, the board of education guides all American public universities. Each university in the U.S adheres to strict academic accreditation standards. Please see Table 1. The U.S higher educational institutions serving over 3000 students in 4-year colleges and another 1,500 in two- year colleges and a total of 20,000 students in higher institutions nationwide (nces.ed.gov, 2014). Critics of the Chinese higher education system of ranking observed that statistical artifacts rather than actual differences are what separate one university from another. Others have stated that China lacked a method of identifying excellent institutions. For this reason, they cannot

arbitrarily perceive some American universities as lower. (Buela-Casal et al, 2007). Though there is little known about the credibility of these pre-suppositions, it has become an issue in many SAEV. This theory propelled the University of Toronto to develop a process of peer identification of prospects with goals that are similar to the objectives of China's project 211 and 985 (Lang & Zha, 2004). The president of Thomas University in the U.S which has MBA and nursing programs at Wenzhou Medical College and Huaqiao University understood this better than most. He found that it was more lucrative to deal with the regional Chinese universities (lower level) supported by the business community and government as opposed to the Chinese National and Key National Universities. This was a strategy employed in order to maintain the sustainability of Thomas University in China (Borgia et al., 2011).

Table 1: The differences between the Chinese and the American system of education

Differences between U.S and China's higher institution rating.	
U.S Institution	Chinese Institution
Specific and detailed sustainability strategy	More general sustainability strategy
Dynamic organizational system	Hierarchical and authoritative system
Decentralized Framework	Centralized Framework
4 level of ranking, bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum	Project 211, 985, National, Regional
AASHE (Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education) and STAR (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System)	Guided by Agenda 21
Bottom-Up approach to management in partnership	Top- Down approach to management in partnerships
Governed by Board of education	Governed by different levels of government
Board of trustee	National provincial and large city level management
Clear criteria for defining educational ratings	Various criteria for defining educational ratings
Carnegie classification of the institute of higher education.	Higher education of the People's republic of China

The U. S higher education system just like China's also uses a comprehensive exam like the SAT and ACT, as one of its criteria for college acceptance. However, American college acceptance is based on overall high school performance (GPA) and extracurricular activity, rather than a cumulative entrance exam like that of China (U.S ministry of education, 2015). This difference creates an issue in the SAEV because Chinese students believed strongly on final exams while foreign instructors focused on overall participation. Yang and Gayle (2004) argued that the Chinese system was subject to government quotas and as such lacked the fundamentals of a fair system of enrollment. They believed that the system was designed to accommodate the wealthiest in the nation, noting that higher education consisted of three stages. The elite stage, where universities enrolled 15% of the college enrollee, the mass stage enrolling 15-50% and the universal stage enrolling over 50% of the college age population. The elite student who failed the entrance exam often registered in a sub-college faction, which was an opportunity for SAEV. This phenomenon created the difference between the haves and the have not's. The Sub-colleges afforded these students the opportunity of a seemingly U.S education while bearing the degree of a prestigious university. The government of China frowned upon this because these students often did not represent the brightest in the country. This became a problem for SAEV administrators who noticed that the students did not excel in the foreign programs as expected. However, last year the government passed an anti-corruption law banning this practice (Per. Comm. 2015). This created a downward enrollment for foreign universities who were not aware of this new policy. This meant that students who did not pass entrance exams could no longer enroll in sub-colleges in SAEV. The State University of New York (SUNY) in collaboration with (RUC) Renmin University of China experienced this problem because they lacked knowledge of the CPC party influence and the opaque nature of doing business in China. Eventually, SUNY lost its programs in China. (KC) Keuka College had also formed the largest foreign provider of higher education in China, but recently that partnership with 11 schools has reduced to three partnerships per government recommendation. Although understanding the government policy is an understatement in the SAEV, it is equally important to note the differences in learning styles, which can create a barrier to the success of these ventures. When matching parent and host institutions, careful analysis of the compatibility of each institution will help in synergizing the ventures. This synergy would be the foundation of SAEV sustainability in mainland China.

2.4 Government policies

The underlying aim of SAEV is for the economic potential of the institutions involved. However, this economic benefit is often overshadowed by China's political reality. Politics in China transcends all aspects of business relations and daily occurrences. This was exasperated in the early 19th century because both the U.S and China were at internal conflict (Kueh, Y. Y., Bridges, B., & Lingnan College, 1997). General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) imposed a market restriction on services like communication, banking, and education. This limited American participation in SAEV. However, since China's 1970 open door policy, there has been a strict regulation imposed by the Chinese government on SAEV. As of 1978, there were an estimated 212,000 joint

ventures in China (Kueh, Et.al, 1997). Julius, & Leventhal, (2014), further intimated that policies and the people implementing the SAEV must be congruent in order to maintain sustainability.

SAEV began to lose sustainability as it became more difficult for many to adhere to r changes in government policy. There was a time when many foreign institutions in SAEV were allowed to establish programs without any accreditations; however, the government has since disqualified many of such programs. Those that remained in China encountered a mirage of continuous sporadic authoritarian government reforms and policies. In China, the government possesses full control of its citizen, thereby creating a threat to the sustainability of SAEV. Furthermore, Chinese authorities believed that SAEV was a form of western indoctrination into the minds of the future generation of China (Southworth, 1999). Kueh Et al, (1997) suggested that Chinese government regulated the mandatory appointment of a Communist party secretary in all educational establishments. Their role is to chair the board of directors and to lead the affairs of that institution. It is equally important to note that all appointed party secretary was responsible for directing all CPC initiatives for that establishment. This is why institutions seeking venture sustainability in China must first understand and become familiar with this idea. Murphy (2012) observed that the government role in all aspect of Chinese education was intricate to the institutional role of society. At one institution, the level of government involvement was evident as both principal and instructors were issued swipe cards to monitor the amount of time spent in their offices. The reason has been that the efficiency of the school authority meant more wealthy students would be attracted to the school, in turn, minimize government deficit. A bigger threat to SAEV sustainability is the sporadic changes to governmental policies in China. Many organizations have a great loss by this factor. With a centralized government, decisions are often made without prior knowledge thereby crippling foreign investors (Li, 2007) Yong, (2014) in his interview on “Education and Authoritarianism in China” argued that the constant monitoring of Chinese student by forcing curriculums on the schools and the administering of standardized tests is a creativity deterrent for many students. This could account for why Chinese students prefer creativity to theoretical learning styles in the classroom, which does not align with the western educational style in SAEV. This phenomenon has proven to hinder the sustainability of SAEV in mainland China (Mustapha, 2014). Change is inevitable; as such, SAEV policies must be adaptable and sustainable relative to the China’s political changes.

III. CONCLUSION

Educational globalization has created an avenue for foreign universities and Chinese universities to collaborate in providing degree programs to millions of students around the world. These programs have experienced both successes and failures. This study has demonstrated an understanding of how discordant educational rating systems, perceived external prestige and intercultural communication and government policies affects the sustainability of Sino-American Joint Educational Ventures in Mainland China. After a careful review of this matter, it was evident that many universities venturing into Sino-American partnerships lacked knowledge of the Chinese mode of doing business. This has created loss for some of the institutions involved. One of the major concerns in these ventures is the role of the government control over businesses. It is important to note that most of the businesses in China are state properties regardless of its size. Furthermore, the Chinese government has great influence in every facet of the economy. Another factor is the issue of intercultural communication. It is not until a foreign organization can assimilate into the Chinese environment will they maintain sustainability in that region. The Chinese culture is backed by 5000 years of history and this is the foundation of the mandarin language. Many organizations have found that doing business in English can be very difficult for the Chinese due to language barrier. The language and cultural differences have created an emotional withdrawal of the Chinese when dealing with foreigners. This is why the use of an intermediary is very crucial in SAEV. China understands its role as an upcoming super power in the global economy and is only interested in SAEV that would secure its position. This study may serve as a foundation for other researchers who might be interested in studying the factors affecting the sustainability of Sino-American Joint ventures in mainland China.

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