

Strategic Research on Implementation Mechanism of Student Participation in University Decision-Making Under Governance

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Abstract: Student participation in university decision-making, a part of university governance, is still defective in the construction of its implementation mechanism. In terms of the problems of unclear subject, unclear scale, unordered participation and the single participation method in student participation in decision-making implementation process, this paper designs the relevant model and brings up the countermeasure, thus providing student participation of decision-making implementation mechanism construction with effective theoretical basis.

Keywords: Student participation; University governance; Implementation mechanism

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1. Introduction

Student participation in university decision-making doesn't originate from modern times, early in medieval Europe, the prestigious University of Bologna started the governance by students, once called "Students' University", where students have absolute rights in university management and decision making. In modern times, in 1998 World Higher Education Conference, it brings up that "the state and decision makers of higher universities and colleges should regard students as the major and responsible participants of higher educational reforms, which includes student participation in discussion related higher education, assessment, reforms of curriculum and teaching method reforms, as well as participation in making policies and management of universities and colleges within the scale of modern system".^① Student participation in decision-making becomes a heated phenomenon in world higher education. In fact, western countries have already considered student participation in decision-making as a habit, during which students can participate in university governance by various means. Comparatively speaking, although there are a series of activities that students participate in university management in many universities in China, most of which are formalistic, and few of them can offer decision-making opportunities to students. To analyze the reasons, on the one hand, universities have the intention but do not place much emphasis on it; on the other hand, it is short of relevant mechanism as guidance. Therefore, it's to construct an implementation mechanism of student participation in decision making, which spec-

ifies the participants, scale, process, method, etc. Thus laying a conducive theoretical foundation for practice of student participation in decision making.

2. Status Quo of Student Participation in University Decision Making

At present, the general problems in student participation in university decision-making are manifested in unclear subject, unclear scale, unordered participation and the single participation method, etc. Which are due to that universities fail to establish a full set of scientific mechanism for guarantee before students participate in decision-making.

2.1 Unclear Subject in Student Participation in Decision-making

The subject in student participation in decision-making refers to the process of selecting the participants before university decision-making, namely the affair that who would be involved in decision-making. For the time being, there is no specific definition regarding student subject who participate in university decision-making, which is shown as follows: First, the laws and regulations with regards to subject selection are unclear. In Higher Education Law and Provisions on the Administration of University Students (2005), both of them stipulate that universities shall protect students' rights of participation in democratic management and decision-making. Many universities statutes put forward that, students shall be enrolled in university administration committee, and students have right of participation in decision-making as major members of the committee. However, in terms of such regulations, it doesn't point out which decisions connect with the stu-

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dents, what proportion of students participation in decision-making is, if it is by individual or by organization, or it is by means of student delegates, and how the delegates get assessed and elected. Obviously, lack of relevant laws and regulations would make subjects that participate in decision-making become blind and randomized, and the actual effects of student participation in decision-making would also definitely get affected.

In addition, the range of subject-choosing is unclear. When university initiates decision making, how broad is the range involving students? What are the standards or definitions in selecting students? When it comes to that university decides to let students participate in decision-making, there are actually no definite answers to such these questions. Let's take a guess, if there is no specific definitions for selecting subjects, then students would probably become the decision-making tool affiliated to university administrative department. Therefore, lack of specific definition of subject selection would simply be a perfunctory performance that students participate in.

2.2 Unclear Scale of Student Participation in Decision-making

The scale of student participation in decision-making refers to which decisions need to involve students and which don't. Although we emphasize all the way that scale of student participation should be enlarged, this enlargement would be not blind, purposeless at all, but scientific and normative instead. At this point, most universities failed, they usually decide on this according to the correlation between the decision-making affair and students. In fact, different affairs lead to different goals. For example, some decision making involving students is for obtaining the attitude orientation of students; while some decision-making is to make students accept the decision-making results, which keeps pace with university goal. If universities confuse the former with the latter, student participation in decision-making would not only lose its meaning, but also seriously affect the final efficiency of decision-making.

2.3 Unordered Student Participation in Decision-making

The process of student participation in decision making is the procedure and steps. Currently, there is no specific regulations about student participation in universities, which presents the unordered and casual features of during student participation. Furthermore, many students are informed of their participation in this temporarily. On the one hand, the disordering can result in purposelessness of student participation, who have no idea about why they get involved and what the purpose is; on the other hand, it decreases the efficiency of student participation, whose original intention of improving the acceptability of deci-

sion-making quality becomes the obstacle to improving decision-making costs.

2.4 Single Method of Student Participation in Decision Making

There are a variety of methods of students participation in decision-making. In foreign countries, it mostly adopts forms of board, council and student union for student participation, while in China, it mainly adopts forms of president email, president acceptance day, etc. to conduct student participation. Compared with foreign countries, the scale, number of participants, influence and diversity in domestic university student participation are simple, shallow and formative. In decision making of domestic universities, students who participate in it fail to represent the benefits of the general students, they are representatives of a small group. Most students who attend president acceptance day and seminar are appointed ones, who are not elected by democratic election of students, violating the original intention of democratic participation of students. Also, the participation method adopted by universities is single, limited to a certain form, which is at a disadvantage in motivate students, and makes student participation monotonous.

3. Implementation Mechanism Conception of Student Participation in University Decision-making

In constructing implementation mechanism of student participation in decision making in university governance, the core problem faced is the realistic difficulties previously mentioned, namely who participate, what kinds of decision making are involved, and what the steps are. Solutions to questions such as what the participation methods are, etc. are the key to student participation in decision-making implementation.

3.1 Scientization of Selection of Subjects in Student Participation

American scholar Henry Rosovsky pointed out that, "as the very core ones related to benefits, students have the qualification to own the control of curriculum offering, teacher engagement, university investment policy, appointment of president and deans, etc."^① This fully demonstrates that students have absolute rights to participate in decision-making of university governance. Regarding whether all the students should get involved, it is an affair of subject selection, namely what kinds of students should be selected. It analyzes the subject selection of student participation in decision-making from three perspectives, which are participant, organizer and the nature of decision-making.

From perspective of participants, namely students, some scholars point out that several following aspects should be taken into accounts in selecting subject^①:1. To

select students who are willing to participate in it, instead of forced selection and decisive inclusion, thus motivating participants at most; 2. To select students who have relevant knowledge and decision-making ability, their level of knowledge and ability directly relates to the decision-making performance; 3. To select decision-making content that has high relativity with students. Therefore, three criteria can be summarized for subject selection under the perspective of students, namely acceptability, knowledge and relativity. If someone has the highest qualification for the three criteria, he or she would be the best candidate for representative of student participation in university decision-making. In terms of allocation of student representatives, it is a part of subject selection.

According to features of China's universities, student representatives can be classified in to three levels by the range which their affiliations belong to: student representatives of university, student representatives of school and student representatives of department. Regarding the number of student representatives in school and department, number of student representatives in department can be confirmed by the proportion of total number of students in the department, larger number means more student representatives; The number of student representatives of school can be 2 as fixed; Student representatives of university can be chairmen of university student union and graduate student union, instead of department or school. Certainly, the factors of what grade students are in and the capacity of students should also be taken into consideration in selecting student representatives, for example, compared to freshmen and seniors, sophomores and juniors are the best choice for student representatives, this is because freshmen are not familiar with the university to some extent, and they are short of abilities; seniors who face with graduation have more things to do rather than concentrate more on university decision making. Therefore, students who are to participate in decision-making should be selected among sophomores, juniors and second-year graduate students. This method of selection, on the one hand, ensures that students have equal rights to participate in it; on the other hand, it ensures that student representative speak for students' rights and benefits, instead of personal interests.

From perspective of organizer, namely from perspective of university, selecting student subject refers to that university decides on participation object and scale according to which group of students would be interested in decision making before student participation in decision-making. This perspective can also be called student subject selection method from bottom to top. In addition, subject selection can be conducted from perspective of

decision-making, different decision-making affairs result in different participation subjects, which needs to consider the following factors^①: 1) Urgency of decision-making affair; 2) Specialization of plan content; 3) Periodicity of time of student intervention; 4) Concreteness of participation approaches; 5) Relativity between advantages and disadvantages. After considering all the above, the scale and number of students who participate in decision making can be confirmed.

3.2 Explicitness of Student Participation Scale

The scale of student participation in decision-making should not depend on the decision by university or students, but the target of decision making instead, namely either taking decision-making quality as target or taking decision-making acceptability as target. Different targets result in different scales, and the participation form can be different as well. The higher the level of requirement of decision making is, the more decisive the right of final decision by university is, whereas the more restrictive student participation will be, which may be merely limited to information acquisition; however, if the higher the level of requirements of decision-making acceptability is, the more power student would have in participation in decision-making. Therefore, the scale of student participation firstly depends on the public decision making target of university. In decision making taking quality as target, whether students should participate in it is decided by university, even if students participate in this, the level would not be high. By making a comparison between the two targets, we can know when universities take student acceptability as target, it would maximize student participation in decision-making, because this item of decision-making is in need of a majority of students' acceptance. As a result, we will place more emphasis on discussing this definition of student participation in decision-making under such situation.

Definitely, not all high-level decision-making and condition guarantee affairs would involve students, hence, university must plan to decide on the scale and extent of proper student participation, which can refer to "Efficient Model in Decision Making" raised by John Clayton Thomas to define it, there are 6 presupposed questions as follows: 1) What are the requirements of decision-making? 2) Does university have rich information? 3) Are the affairs institutionalized? 4) Is it a must that student acceptability exists in decision-making implementation? If decision-making doesn't involve students, is the execution of decision making going to stop? 5) Are the students stakeholders? 6) If students act as stakeholders, is their target in accordance with the university administrative offices? If the above conditions pass, then students should participate in this item of decision-making.

In terms of the above 6 six questions, different answers lead to different decision-making methods and scale, which can be probably divided into 3 sorts including autonomous management, negotiation decision-making and public decision-making. Among the 3 sorts, autonomous management decision-making refers mostly to the unilateral university decision-making; negotiation decision-making refers to decision making by discussion of university and part of students; public decision-making refers to common decision-making after reaching a consensus by university and all the students. From autonomous management to public decision-making, the number of students who participate in decision-making is larger and larger, however, public decision-making is definitely the most favorable one to student participation.

How to choose the tree methods for participation in decision-making? It needs to define the scale of student participation. Different decision-making affairs require different information, university had completed information regarding some affairs, which doesn't directly relate with students and require student participation, thus adopting autonomous decision making; regarding some affairs, although university has information about them, but it is not adequate and has indirect correlation with students' benefits, and also, it needs more through student participation, which requires to adopt negotiation decision-making; in terms of some other affairs, university has already obtained some information, which has direct correlation with students' benefits, it needs to get more information from students, and have acceptance of students, thus requiring to adopt public decision-making.

Decision-making affairs can be classified into three sorts by relativity with students' benefits: affairs that relate directly with students' benefits, affairs that relate indirectly with students' benefit and affairs that don't relate with students' benefits. The former two sorts, due to their relativity with students' benefits, must adopt negotiation or public decision-making, while the third one may adopt autonomous decision-making by university according to actual situation, for example, when it needs to consider the relative benefits in view of the development of the whole university, students' opinions can not be fully considered; when university capacity gets restricted by access to law enforcement, financial budget, etc., and meanwhile, students' opinions are beyond university capacity, then students' opinions can not be fully adopted, either; when students' opinions conflict with university, failing to reach to a consensus, university can conduct autonomous decision making. Therefore, on the one hand, the definition of scale of student participation depends on the degree of relativity of benefits, on the other hand, it depends on de-

cision-making affairs.

3.3 Execution Routinization in Student Participation Process

Herbert Simon, American famous managerialist, said, "management is decision making, decision making is the process". Decision-making process is generally divided into parts of confirmation of affairs, analysis, selection, implementation, evaluation, supervision, etc. Student participation in decision-making may also be regarded as the decision-making process, which can be subdivided into such parts as well. Besides, it requires to add the element of time, thus the above-mentioned parts come down to three sections of pre-decision making, ongoing decision-making and post-decision making.

The author designs a systematic model of student participation process(see Figure 1.), on which pre-decision making corresponds to preparation stage, ongoing decision-making corresponds to game playing stage and implementation stage, and post-decision making corresponds to evaluation stage.

1) Preparation Stage: It mainly includes confirmation of affair, analysis, confirmation of personnel and plan. During preparation stage, university acts as the main role, while student are not involved.

2) Game Playing Stage: It it a stage during which university negotiates with students, including suggestions of students, consensus between university and students after discussion, and final decision. In this process, students play as the main role, and it is an important link which gets students' suggestion delivered, and right of decision making realized, thus directly resulting in the effect of student participation in decision-making.

3) Implementation Stage: It includes execution of decision-making, feedback and supervision, information release. In case of problems in execution, adjustments and modification can be made in time by the feedback of students. This stage can be called the interaction process between university and students, in which students gives feedback about decision-making in terms of personal experience and university communicates with students in terms of feedback, timely revising decision-making to achieve win-win accomplishments of satisfying students and implementing decision-making. Undoubtedly, not all decision making needs revise, which is based on influence of decision-making affair and its importance, for instance, some real-time decision-making doesn't require revise.

4) Evaluation Stage: It includes confirmation of evaluation system, feedback of evaluation result. Without doubt, this model is a general one designed in this paper according to actual situation of university, not every decision-making affair should follow this process, which can specifically

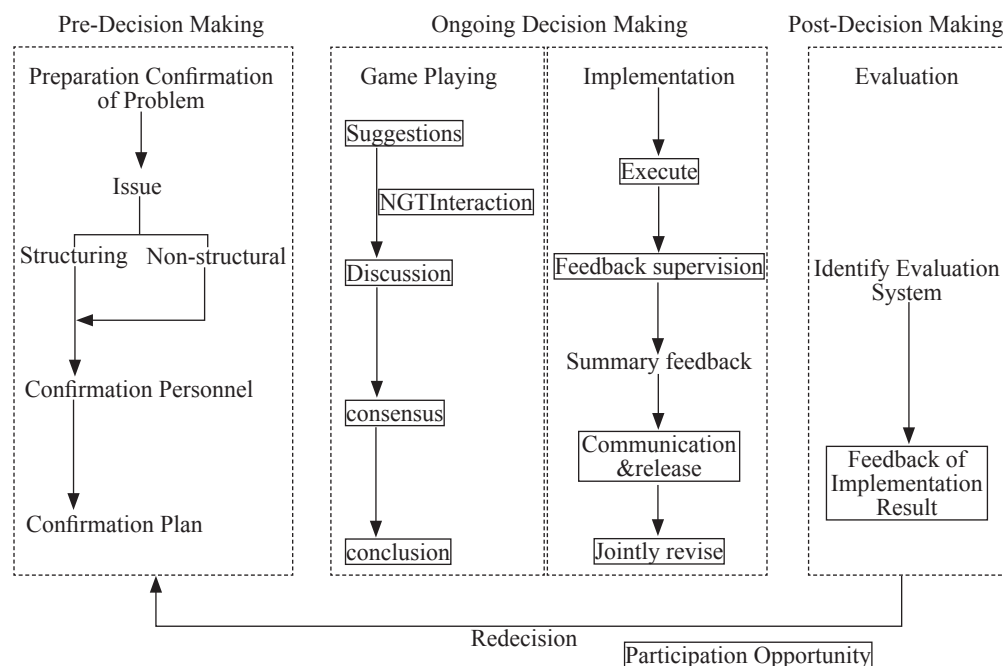


Figure 1. Systematic model of student participation in university decision making process

add or subtract some procedures.

3.4 Dynamic diversification of student participation methods

With regards to the practice in domestic and foreign universities, there are a variety of methods for student participation in decision-making. On the one hand, diversification of participation method enables more students take part in more decision-making; on the other hand, it may improve students' enthusiasm. According to different standards, the methods are as follows: Direct participation and indirect participation; systematized participation and non-system participation; individual participation and organizational participation. At present, regarding such methods, apart from direct participation and indirect participation, the most popular methods are individual participation, organizational participation and agency participation.

1) To participate in decision making by individual: Individual participation refers to that students use the opportunity provided by university to directly take part in university affairs related to their benefits including teaching affairs, condition guarantee affairs and administrative affairs. The individual participation methods applied most so far are student assistant principal, student messenger, etc.

Student assistant principal is a method that "university conducts public employment throughout the whole university and chooses assistant principal from excellent students to assist the principal with student work, and then assistant principal participates in important decision making by directly submitting such opinions and proposals to

the decision-makers".^① This kind of methods has been put into place in many universities, such as Nanchang University, Anhui University, etc. Among such universities, Nanchang University, having implemented this method since 2004, is the most effective. Its organization system has been complete from election to taking office through 11 years, in which every part is guaranteed by relevant regulations and rules. "In stage of selection, start the registration publicly first within the whole university, set relevant selection standard, conduct written test, interview and retest, finally employ assistant principal after reviewing by principal; There are 3 or 4 assistant principals in each term, which is 1 year, it would renew assistant principals for the next term upon the expiration of the last term; the main responsibilities are collecting suggestions on university affairs from students, submitting proposals, assisting principal with student affairs, attending university meetings and activities as a nonvoting delegate, etc."^②

Student assistant principal, and individual participating in university management and decision-making on behalf of the whole, is not only a messenger and participant, but also a servant, whose importance goes without saying. Therefore, while encouraging universities to appoint student assistant principals, we need to better the mechanism of student assistant principal and define this post specifically. On the one hand, define who assistant principal is working for. A survey indicates that many student principals have obscure definition for this post, they have different opinions on who they speak for; on the other

hand, define the influence of decision-making affairs. A report shows that, student assistant principals in most universities are formative, which has tiny influence on decision-making result, lack of substantial rights greatly hinders the conveyance of students' suggestions.

2) To participate in decision-making by organization: Student organization refers to "organization that university establishes based on demands of educational management and requirements of university, or a mass community students organize themselves according to their needs, with certain organizational and management functions."^①

Since stepping into the campus, students have already lived in various "organizations", such as dormitory, classroom, major, school and department, etc., which naturally forms student organization-centered university life. "In process of decision-making, each member has equal rights, students should undoubtedly participate in university affairs related to their own benefits, which is one of the educational values of student organization."^② Obviously, student organization plays an significant role in students participating in decision-making.

3) To participate in decision-making by agency: Such agencies mainly refer to administrative offices in university. Though domestic universities begin to ask more and more high-level decision-making offices, such as school administration committee, president office and professor consultative council, to set up certain seats for students, it is still inefficient. American universities stimulate certain seats for students in school board, school administration committee and professor consultative council to guarantee students' rights of participation in important decision-making. France specifies the seats for students in university administrative committee, university academic committee and university studies and life committee, among which the number of student representatives of university administrative committee takes up a quarter, number of student representatives of university academic committee takes up 1/8, all of which fully guarantees students' rights of participation in university affairs.^①

4. Conclusion

Construction of implementation mechanism of student participation in decision-making is not a simple demonstration of participation details, instead, it is a structure that can guide practical operation, as well as a methodology of scientific participation in decision-making. Through construction of the mechanism, we can further specify practical operational ways to issues in the process of student participation in decision-making, such as who participate, which decision-making needs students, what the scale of participation is, etc., thus eventually realizing normalization and scientization of student participation in

decision-making.

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