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“I am just a loser of higher education”: a framework for comparative analysis of the value of adult higher education derived from a Chinese study

Abstract

This paper proposes a unique framework for comparative analysis of different Adult Higher Education (AHE) systems. The framework combines, a conceptualisation of how students’ outcomes are shaped by the way that they and their degree courses are positioned in stratified higher education systems with, insights about the effects of institutional practice and individual students’ agency gained from applying Basil Bernstein’s notion of pedagogic rights and underpinning concepts. The framework facilitates an exploration of structures and agencies manifesting through institutional practices, students’ and graduates’ experiences. The value of the framework is illustrated by an analysis of biographical interviews with twenty female, Chinese AHE students and ten graduates. It tracks an emergent process evident in students and graduates’ descriptions of their disappointing emergent identities and limited employment progression. The framework provides a non-deterministic analysis that can inform how to comparatively analyse and improve AHE’s contribution to societies and economies.

Key words: stratified higher education system, inequality of higher education, pedagogic rights, China, adult higher education

Introduction

The paper proposes a novel framework for comparing and potentially improving the effectiveness of adult higher education (AHE) systems and sub-systems nationally and internationally. AHE systems are often considered to be too complex to usefully analyse comparatively (Rees 2013). However, frameworks for doing this are critical if AHE is to fulfil the economic, political, social and cultural ambitions of rapidly changing global societies that need to further educate their ageing populations (ibid). Students attending universities outside of the normative age-range need adequately and appropriately supporting by curricula, pedagogies and wider resources if they are to become, as they do in some contexts, as effective and highly qualified graduates as those attending regular higher education (RHE) (Desjardins and Lee 2016).

The framework we propose also eschews a notion that the quality and value of education is only measured employment outcomes and contribution to the economy. It draws upon Webb et
al.’s (2017) conceptualisation of way that the hierarchical positioning of courses within national and international tertiary systems affects their ability to generate social mobility for those attending: a model associated with an employment focus. However, this is integrated with Bernstein’s (2000) notion of pedagogic rights, and the underlying concepts associated with his theory are proposed as mechanisms that can be helpfully be used to develop insight into how the structures proposed by Webb et al. (2017) are generated in diverse ways. Pedagogic rights identify what education should give all citizens if they were to have equal access to an education that allowed them to contribute effectively: economically, socially, culturally and politically (Bernstein 2000). Through our analysis of the Chinese context we argue it has value beyond the democratically aspiring countries it was developed for. Using the amalgamated theoretical framework, we present our analysis of biographical interviews with twenty students and ten graduates from AHE in two Chinese universities of different status. We identify the factors affecting the shortcomings of Chinese AHE education in relation to outcomes for individual students and Chinese society (Nesbit 2015).

Initially we had a particular interest in Chinese AHE because the country has an impressively large suite of programmes catering for adult students wanting to study for a bachelor’s degree intended to expand and upskill the workforce (Liu 2018). We wanted to understand why the positive perceptions indicated by the scale and popularity of the AHE system (14.89% of students registered in Chinese higher education in 2018 were studying AHE), are undermined by a plethora of negative evaluations (Yang 2016; Wei 2018). Graduates gain work-related knowledge, employment opportunities and increased salaries (Chen 2015) but as students, feel: marginalised (Qin 2016); excluded (Liu 2018); discriminated against (Lu 2014); and under-confident (Wei 2018). The financial returns are less than the half of that of regular higher education (RHE) (Yang 2016). Graduates mostly get small promotions in their current fields of employment, not the higher-skilled jobs obtained by RHE graduates (Sun 2019). It is in interrogating this situation we arrived at our framework which we describe next in order that the concepts can inform the remainder of the paper.
Theoretical framework: pedagogic rights and the stratification of AHE

Webb et al.’s (2017) conceptual framework was derived from Ebner’s (2015) work that was used to illuminate a comparative study of UK and Australian programmes aimed at disadvantaged students to promote social mobility. Four factors were found to influence how these programmes location within higher education system were able to facilitate social mobility for students: a) the way that qualifications were valued in the academic arena (their credibility); b) the status of the different institutions they were studied in; c) the personal and social perceptions of the students who study for and hold the qualifications (how individual graduates and students were seen by themselves and wider society); and, d) the value of the qualification in the labour market. Hence, this model suggests that effective AHE outcomes would result if it was highly valued across the sector, taught in high status institutions, studied by students and graduates who saw themselves as valuable and were seen as strong graduates widely, and, if the qualification was respected by employers. As will be seen, the AHE we studied partially confirmed this model, which had some explanatory power and through Bernstein’s (2000) framework it illuminated and explained anomalies.

Bernstein (2000) suggest that to generate just outcomes all members of societies need access to the three interdependent pedagogic rights: 1) individual enhancement, which is gained when students develop confidence through learning critical and potentially powerful (inter) disciplinary knowledge (e.g. education or business studies); 2) social inclusion, which is accessed when graduates are personally, socially and intellectually included in their universities and in society (usually through employment but it could be a voluntary or social role) where they can helpfully use critical knowledge and adopt a valued social identity; and, 3) political participation, which occurs when graduates are able to contribute to the generation and transformation of their chosen field of employment (Bernstein 2000; Author 2 et al, 2019). For example, an AHE business student could gain access to pedagogic rights through a curriculum and pedagogy that gives them insight into why the environmental damage that is
caused by industry is not inevitable and understands how to conceptualise sustainable alternatives for the future (individual enhancement). If their university includes them intellectually and personally and they can gain access to a job (or social position) to use this knowledge (social inclusion) and when this also gives them the possibility to transform knowledge and practice in their field (political participation). Individual students may not always reach the same standard, but using this framework helps provides a benchmark for evaluating successful policy, courses and outcomes. We were aware that it is controversial to apply these specific hierarchies associated with capitalist democratically oriented societies, and sort to investigate whether such an analysis is helpful for Chinese communism.

Bernstein’s (2000) notion of codes has been utilised as the underpinning concept for both frameworks. Codes, which are embedded in everything in the world: knowledge, curricula, individual consciousness, emotions, actions, thoughts, textbooks, organisations, policies and so forth (ibid) as integral to pedagogic rights Bernstein (2000), but also as constitutive of Webb et al.’s (2017) framework: which as a framework for examining policy and legislative differences is not conceptualised at this level. Codes generate the hierarchical relationship between, for example, vocational and academic knowledge and are made up of interactions between: a) classifications, which denote power by giving high or low status (e.g. AHE and RHE or vocational and academic knowledge); and, b) framings, which convey control and determine who can do what, when and in what context: such as teach, select curricula or make knowledge based decisions in workplaces. Classifications and framings can be strong or weak, for example, we find that AHE is strongly classified as lower status compared to RHE, generating a strong boundary between its graduates and a steep hierarchy that is hard to transcend. Weaker classifications involve lesser status differences. Framings determine things such as who can access university facilitates and different types of curricula within universities. Again, different strengths of framing produce different levels of hierarchy and indicate the likelihood that individuals’ and institutions will have successful counter agencies and how, for example, the degree to which governments framing of qualifications can be challenged by
institutional status or individual students. Bernstein (2000) theorised that access to knowledge is structured by the wealth and status structure of society, which is in turn shaped by hierarchical labour markets’ stratified rewards systems, that also produce the intergenerational educational (dis)advantages they fuel. Again, these concepts do not map perfectly onto any one context, but they provide tools with which to interrogate AHE in different contexts.

Webb et al.’s (2015) conceptualisation facilitates an investigation of the determining powers of the cumulative forces of the wider structural powers associated with national policies and university stratification in different contexts. Bernstein’s framework enables examination of how institutional policies, practices and individual students’ agency can and do reinforce or challenge these and it provides a social justice orientation to the study in defining what good education should achieve (second author 2019). Whilst our study does not have sufficient data to do maximum justice to the framework, it does illustrate how this approach can provide a complex and in depth non-deterministic analysis of AHE and its value to individuals, societies, cultures and economies.

Higher Education Stratification and Adult Higher Education

Internationally, AHE is embedded in increasingly massified and more complexly stratified higher education systems (Desjardins 2017). Hence, a more multifaceted array of institutions, degrees and students are hierarchically differentiated through emergent stronger and weaker classifications between institutions, courses and students. Globally, AHE students attending higher education are thought to be those who have been disadvantaged by compulsory education systems such as lower socio-economic groups, ethnic minorities, students with disabilities etc. and they are concentrated in universities and/or courses that are strongly classified as low value and low quality, giving them lower status as students and graduates (Leuze 2011; Author 2, 2019). AHE students location in stratified systems is often cast as
being due to their capabilities and personal qualities, rather than due to their being failed by compulsory education, and they are therefore their classification as less entitled to the most economically and socially valued forms of employment goes uncontested (Teichler 2002). However, whilst these strong classifications are an international phenomenon the literature also suggests national differences (Calitz 2019) and a more recent comparative study evaluates AHE outcomes for students more positively (Desjardins and Lee 2016). Hence, the need to understand this complexity in a systematic and comparative way, if we are to learn from international policy and practice.

**The Stratification and Classification of Adult Higher Education in Chinese Universities**

Every Chinese adult has a legal right of to study for and sit the Gaokao (a strongly classified national university entrance exam whose results differentiate students as suitable or not for different forms of RHE) at any time of their life. However, the strong framing implicit to a lack of financial support for studying for the Gaokao and then RHE implicitly excludes most adults. Accessibility to AHE is weakly classified as entrance exams are available to everyone and defined as less rigorous. Students study AHE in three ways: by distance learning (in Chinese *Yuan Cheng Jiao Yu*), through self-taught examination (*Zi Kao*) and through evening university (*Ye Da*) (Chen et al. 2017). Distance learning and self-taught modes involve independent study whereas evening university involves on campus face-to-face teaching and is most like RHE. It is these latter students we are focused upon.

Five tiers of university are significant to understanding Chinese university and AHE stratification. There are 42 top tier universities, financially supported by central government to become internationally excellent (Zhao 2018). A wider group of universities (196 overall) who received funding under two previous central government initiatives (known as 985 and 211 initiatives) are also classified as top tier. A group of second tier universities are funded by the provincial governments. Third tier universities are privately funded. Specialist AHE institutions are considered lower still (ibid). China currently invests in the RHE
(inter)disciplines with international recognition (Jiang and Sun 2018). Whereas, investment in AHE has decreased and the government has insisted they are more vocationally focused (vocational knowledge being classified as hierarchically lower than academic knowledge) (Chen et al. 2017; Liu 2018), reinforcing hierarchies between RHE and AHE. However, we envisaged that universities’ actual investment in AHE might be affected by the financial resources they have, and students’ status and outcomes might vary.

Between 1997 and 2018 the proportion of AHE students studying for BA qualifications in China rose from 12.62% (287,043 no.) 17.54% (2,971,134 no.) (see figure 1). Hence, AHE students’ potential to contribute to the Chinese economy and society has increased.

![Figure 1. Total students in the RHE system and AHE system in China](image)

The majority of the 2 million AHE students are enrolled in vertically segregated universities (85.42% of AHE students) (MoE 2017). However, nationally all AHE programmes are classified as of lower value and as a separate to RHE degrees. AHE curricula and pedagogy have been found to be badly designed (Yang 2016) and no universities offer the same range of academic disciplines and programmes to AHE students (first author 2019; Zhao 2018). There is insufficient knowledge of whether universities attempt to counter these structural factors of the apparently low value of AHE degrees, the social perception of the degree and students, and
whether students studying in different status universities gain access to different quality programmes and outcomes.

China appears not to have explored the extent to which AHE redistributes the opportunities and reward (Mok and Wu, 2016). They do not have policies around inclusive educational contexts, nor are they concerned with diverse and supportive pedagogies, assessments, curricula, fairer financial support and so forth, that other countries believe might weaken classifications between mature and other students (Isopahkala-Bouret et al. 2015). They do not appear to systematically chart the demographic characteristics or needs of its AHE students in ways that might lead to understandings that support access, achievement and progression as far as we can tell. Even though, it is well known that financial status, parental educational level, migration status, domestic arrangements (such as being left behind), geographical location, ethnic minority status, disability status and so forth, are known to impact upon educational success (Jiang and Sun 2018). Hence, we had hoped this study could provide initial interest and incentive to inform policy change in China.

Methodology

The data generation focused on developing descriptions of twenty students’ and ten recent graduates’ experiences of accessing and participating in AHE and the anticipated or actual effects on their employment. The data-analysis is developed around the question of how we theorise the relationship between students’ identities and higher education stratification in a way that allows us to comparatively analyse the value of different national AHE systems and sub-systems.

Participants

The participants were selected with the first question in mind and it was speculated that there may be institutional differences regarding their experiences and outcomes. A seemingly best-case scenario, of a large eastern coast city, where students stood the best chance of gaining
access to universities of some repute and to jobs and positions where they could use their knowledge was selected as the research site (Flyvberg 2006). A first tier and second tier university were chosen for exploratory comparison of institutional status. Places and participants are anonymised.

A volunteer snowball sample generated an unintentionally biased sample of thirty female adult students (15 from each university) studying Education, Chinese Literature, Human Resource Management, Administrative Management and Business-related subjects. It cannot straightforwardly be generalised to males, but it gives us a richer understanding of women’s experiences. Chinese parenting practices, educational experiences and the horizontal and vertical division of labour market indicate there are likely to be significant gender differences (Sheng 2012). The sample were aged between 24 and 46; 20 were still studying and 10 had recently graduated; 24 reported they were from families who were economically well-off, eight said they were from averagely affluent families (participants likely vary in how they perceive economic strength) (Reay et al. 2009); just over a third were first generation university students (but in recently massified systems the significance is hard to read); and, most were born in the city (see Table 1). As there is no data on the overall gender, economic status, parental educational background and age of the total AHE student cohort in China or on different AHE courses, we don’t know how typical this group is even for the disciplines they studied (MoE 2017). However, comparative questions for future investigation of Chinese AHE are opened-up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Wealthy family</th>
<th>Less wealthy family</th>
<th>First generation in HE</th>
<th>Non-first generation in HE</th>
<th>From city</th>
<th>From rural area</th>
<th>211/985 PU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30 (18 no.)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 (10 no.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. The Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>41-50 (2 no.)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Codes and data analysis

Once transcribed, interviews in Chinese were translated into English by the first author (a native Chinese-speaker). Translation cross-checking processes were carried out with an academic colleague. Following the general reading/listening to a group of transcripts, the first author thematically coded the transcripts using the NVivo software package to inductively identify themes for descriptive open coding (Creswell 2013). The data-analysis has been complex, iterative and has involved a continuous, long-term dialogue with the second author over the internet and mostly in writing. Ultimately, it resulted in generating open codes, that were iteratively produced in dialogue with the two frameworks through a comprehensive analysis for the data pertaining to each of the codes using the questions presented in the table below and illustrated in the presentation of the data in the results section. As the data was not generated with the framework in mind it is not as comprehensive as we would have liked but are argument is that it could usefully drive all stages of future research projects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Codes</th>
<th>Questions Used to Map Coding onto Pedagogic Rights</th>
<th>Questions used to incorporate Webb et al (2017) into the framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Students perception RHE and AHE</td>
<td>Enhancement (What evidence is there that students had been supported to gain access to enhancement and how had this (not) happened?)</td>
<td>What did the data pertaining to each pedagogic right say about the role, impact and constitution of: 1) the academic value of the qualification; 2) the status of the universities; 3) the personal and social perception of students and graduates; 4) the value of the qualification in employment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) pedagogy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) curricula</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) entrance exams</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) qualifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Students perception of wider Social Inclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Coding process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>university</th>
<th>(What evidence was there that students had (not) been socially, intellectually and personally included in their university and through their employment?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) campus</td>
<td>3. Students perception of current and future employment a) qualifications b) employment contexts c) promotion d) skills and knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) resources</td>
<td>Political Participation (What evidence was there that students' experiences and employment equipped them for and gave them access to political participation?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) time/space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) lecturers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

Chinese AHE and Access to Pedagogic Rights.

This section presents our analysis of students accounts of their experiences and explores whether they appear to gain access to any of the three pedagogic rights. The sections discuss enhancement, inclusion and participation in turn and include an analysis of how they interrelate to keep in place or transcend those of the four effects of HE stratification identified by Webb et al. (2017) that have relevant data.

Individual Enhancement

Students access enhancement when university experiences offer “the means of critical understanding and to seeing new possibilities” and their personal horizons are expanded so that they build confidence to use this knowledge independently in context (Bernstein 2000, xx). Students views about whether they would (before they started) and actually did (when at university) gain access to enhancement through knowledge are evident in their accounts of what they believe they were seen as eligible to access, given the wider academic valuing of AHE and in their views on the curricula they accessed.
Personal and Social Perceptions of Students and Graduates

Twenty-four of the students had personal and social perceptions of themselves and AHE that did not indicate that they were getting access to transformative knowledge. They also believed they had a fixed identity and were deemed not entitled to critical knowledge.

*This stratified higher education system helps the nation to offer the best higher education resources to the best students. The … system does not aim to let more people benefit from authentic higher education but to stratify people … resources and programmes.* (29, 211/985, third year, second generation, urban, average income.)

*Gaokao-performance is perceived as marker of students’ capacity and intelligence. The Gaokao failures are seen as not capable of attaining academic-oriented higher education. … AHE is prepared for others rejected by RHE.* (35, 211/985, third year, second generation+, rural, good income).

Whilst some students saw this as an injustice, generally there was an acceptance of this status as inevitable and themselves as somewhat undeserving. Twenty-one of the participants appeared to strongly classify themselves as less good and unentitled to enhancement.

Institutional Status

The two institutions participants attended did not seem to confer differential access to enhancement or give them the identity they associated with RHE students belonging to these educational establishments. Twenty-six of the participants still strongly classified themselves as RHE failures even thought they were passing or had graduated their courses. These two were typical:

*I failed the Gaokao when I was young. After I worked for a few years I wanted to study for a degree, but I only can study in AHE. … I do not have the time and vigour to prepare for the Gaokao like a high school student does. I see myself as an ‘RHE reject’ …* (33, 211/985, second year, first generation, urban, good income.)

*I did not perform well enough in the Gaokao so I was rejected by university when I was young. Now … only the AHE is available for … a working adult.* (28, PU, first year, second generation, urban, good income.)

These participants reinforce Webb et al.’s (2017) idea that the strong national level
classification of AHE\RHE (structures and knowledges) affect AHE and this does not vary according to institutional status.

However, 24 participants described the frustration they felt between the contradiction between, the weak classification between regular and mature students and the strong financial framing that denied students access to what they believed would be a superior curricula, and (as is described below) a lack of enhancement:

*RHE only provides full-time study mode, which is impossible for me to do since I have my full-time work and family. ... RHE rejects working adults since it does not provide or intend to provide part-time study mode...* (25, 211/985, first year, first generation, rural student, average income.)

*There is no part-time program provided by RHE. I cannot quit my job to study full-time in RHE. ...AHE is the only way for me to attain higher education. (29, PU, first year, second generation, urban, average income.).*

This did not differ between students from different status institutions.

**Value of Qualifications in Universities**

First author (2019) indicates that students valued the curriculum in that they worked hard to access it by developing mutually beneficial guanxi (a Chinese concept which signifies the cultivation of relationships with another to generate benefits) with other AHE students (e.g. by sharing notes). However, the focus on knowledge content in this analysis reveals that students were keen to pass but were extremely negative about the curriculum offered, and they intimate a lack of enhancement. This quotation represents one of the only 2 exceptions:

*There is one teacher who really helped me with my work. This teacher always introduces new knowledge to us. For example, she always introduces good learning websites to us, and tells us which websites or Blogs that show new knowledge or good learning materials in our subjects. ... and shows us how to keep on learning by ourselves. (28, PU, third year, first generation, urban, good income.)*

Otherwise, all 28 students indicated that the curriculum itself was of little value and suggested it rarely or only slightly increased their knowledge and understanding:
Nearly all the things taught in university I have learnt before when I was in senior vocational college for three years. The textbooks used in university are the same as the textbooks we used in college; the subjects are similar. ... I really cannot benefit much. (32, PU, first year, first generation, urban, average income).

The teaching content is the same as the stuff taught in my college study so many years ago. The modules are just repeated, and the teaching content is almost the same as the college level. (29, PU, third year, first generation, urban, good income).

Hence, the participants strongly classified the knowledge they gained access to as not bestowing enhancement. They also universally saw the framing of the degree as problematic.

The degree award is based on our credits, so we must ... study(ing) a certain number of modules during the limited time... but each module just has a few lectures. Some modules only have two lectures, then we have exams. We really cannot learn much from the limited lectures. It is pointless to get a massive amount of credits with low quality lectures. (42, 211/985, third year, first generation, rural, average income).

The university only arranged three days for completing one module, within which the last half day is for the exam. So, we only have two and a half days for finishing one module. What can the teachers teach and what can we learn during such a short time? So, the teachers just pour tons of information into us and cannot go into detail... What we can really learn, and digest is really limited. (33, PU, second year, second generation, urban, good income).

A strongly framed curriculum, teacher focused with a pace and pedagogy determined by quickly taken exams appeared not offer individual enhancement. These findings applied similarly regardless of which of the two institutions participants went to, their socio-economic status, urban and rural background and their age, or what they studied.

Social Inclusion

Inclusion refers to students ‘right to be included, socially, intellectually, culturally and personally’ in their universities and then in their field of employment (Bernstein 2000, xx). Arguably a lack of enhancement straightforwardly excludes as these are nested concepts. However, in students’ and graduates lives the potential for inclusion and enhancement are
happening synchronously and they are not straightforwardly deterministic at the individual level: students may be gaining transformative knowledge through outside of the curricula or arrive with it. However, the data presented here suggests that both in university life and then in employment students’ social inclusion is not achieved.

**Value of Qualifications in Universities**

Overall students’ idea that their qualification was not valued in academic terms was reinforced by the spatial, temporal and material framing of the degree. The temporal framing of AHE as an evening-class strongly classified students as outside of the daytime only RHE programmes. Additionally, resources such as libraries, social spaces, and so forth were inaccessible to these students. Also, the pedagogic framing did not allow AHE students to gain relationships with lecturers they believed were afforded to RHE students. All of this classified them as outsiders. These quotations are characteristic of the whole sample.

*I felt like an outsider ... since I knew nothing about the university. There was nothing we could participate in.... There was only one classroom we could use across the entire university. ...We did not know the lecturers and the teachers did not know us. We had no involvement in university life. (28, 211, graduated, second generation, urban, average income)*

*I couldn’t use anything on campus or... take part in any activities. I only went once or twice a week and only for two or three hours. The university did not treat us in the same way as it treats ...RHE students. (26, PU, graduated, first generation, rural, good income)*

This series of exclusions prevailed across both institutions and reinforce a sense that the degree and the graduates are of little value.

**Personal and Social Perceptions of Students and Graduates**

A lack of inclusion also appears to arise from students self-isolating behaviour. This was described by 23 students and as the literature above suggests, it further compounded their identity as ‘outsiders’: These quotations are good examples.

*I feel ...we are not cared for by the university, so I do not want to be involved in the university... We feel inferior to them (RHE students). We just stay away from them and stay together. (24, PU, second year, second*
generation, rural, good income)

I have nearly no other engagement with university apart from my courses, so I just come and go...I normally stay with my classmates and avoid encountering those RHE students. I still have a feeling of inferiority to them and I do want them to judge me as an AHE student. (33, 211/985, first year, first generation, urban, average income)

This aspect of the data demonstrates how institutions and then students internalised and enacted what Bernstein (2000) sees as the biases in the system that ‘drain the very springs of affirmation, motivation and imagination’ (xix) of students such as these:

We ourselves and society perceive the AHE students at a lower level than the RHE students. ... We see ourselves as the losers of higher education, and we feel that society believes that our failure in the Gaokao indicates that we are not intelligent enough. (30, 211/985, third year, second generation, urban, good income)

Failing the Gaokao means I am a loser of higher education, which I cannot change for the rest of my life. Studying in the AHE is telling people that I am not able to study in the RHE, which is shameful. (34, 211/985, second year, first generation, rural area, average income)

Hence, neither students or graduates classify themselves as ‘socially, intellectually, culturally and personally’ included.

**Value of AHE Qualification in the Labour Market**

The data on the ten graduates post-AHE trajectories, (See Table 2) indicates the social inclusion of graduates in that they had jobs and took up a social positions relating to their degrees: two gained promotion and one a salary rise; three got a new jobs; three stayed in the same job; and, two had some hope for small promotions or career advancement in the future. However, as can be seen by their reflections on their progression in Table 2, the qualification has not given them access to RHE level employment. Reasons for this include a glass ceiling between AHE and RHE, needing RHE qualifications to access some positions and companies lack willingness to accept AHE and RHE degrees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Majors of Graduated Participants</th>
<th>Previous Job</th>
<th>Current Job</th>
<th>Summary of Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Early</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Promoted in</td>
<td>The AHE degree facilitated promotion. The</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Early Childhood Education
Private kindergarten teacher | Public kindergarten teacher
A public kindergarten was not her ideal job but was higher status and pay than private kindergarten. Her aspiration to be a primary teacher could not be fulfilled with an AHE degree.

3. Chinese Literature
Private kindergarten teacher | Public kindergarten teacher
Positive she used AHE to get a job in a public kindergarten, but they were becoming more competitive and the benefit of owning an AHE degree was decreasing. She was frustrated and sorry that she was not capable of an RHE degree.

4. Financial Management
Accounting in company | Promoted in the same job
She got promotion because the company she worked in was small and could not hire RHE graduates. She would not be able to compete with RHE graduates.

5. International Economics and Trade
Sales in company | Same with salary raise
She was happy with the salary raise. Future promotion would depend on job performance rather than AHE degree.

6. Human Resource Management
Administrator in company | Same profession - better company
Good jobs attracted and hired RHE graduate; average jobs wanted to hire RHE graduates and lower level jobs hired AHE graduates. This new job was a good for AHE.

7. Administrative Management
Administrator in community committee | No change
She didn’t seek immediate benefit. She did not want to be someone who did not have degree. Having AHE was better than none. But she expressed helplessness and frustration.

8. Administrative Management
Administrator in company | Salary raised - same job
She did not have high ambitions, appreciated benefitting from an AHE degree. She did not want to be left behind as her manager pushed her to get degree.

9. Business Management
Staff in factory | Salary raised in the same job
An AHE degree could not help her fulfil her ambitions to progress to the top in her factory. She could access some promotion through degree plus performance. She thought AHE degree would not count in the future and sought to progress rapidly.

HR in company | No change
Her company did not reward her AHE degree, because many employees had RHE degrees. Without a degree she risked being sacked.

Table 3. The ten graduates’ trajectories post-AHE

**Political Participation**

Whilst we do not have clear insight into whether graduates’ definition of a good RHE job relates completely to Bernstein’s (2000) notion of participation, it is clear there is dissatisfaction that relates to participation which cause frustration:

*My AHE degree is accepted in my profession but there are so many jobs that only recognise the full-time RHE degree and it is impossible for you to*
get a good job by having the AHE degree. (32, 211/985, second year, first generation, urban, average income)

We also got some limited insights into the sense of injustice of not getting access to knowledge that would facilitate participation, this is one example.

The majority of teachers just read textbooks or the PowerPoint in class, but there are a few teachers normally playing videos which present the real situation in kindergarten. I like these videos because I am a new teacher with little experience, and I can see what happens in kindergarten from those videos. ... But since nearly none of my teachers in AHE have work experience in kindergarten, they can only show us the real situation in kindergarten through videos. (27, 211/985, second year, first-generation, urban, good income.)

However, this quotation also illustrates that we really need to know a bit more about the type of knowledge that underpins AHE if we are to properly understand the relationship between access to pedagogic rights, the role of education in generating social, cultural and economic prosperity and increasing justice.

Overall Analysis of System

Table 5 illustrates and simplifies how the classifications and framings that appear to deny access to pedagogic rights for most of these Chinese graduates are, at a higher level of structuration partially held in place by the policies and practices that position AHE within the wider structuring of higher education (Webb et al., 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Status of AHE in China</th>
<th>Significant Classifications</th>
<th>Significant Framings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value of Qualification in Universities (Low)</td>
<td>Strong boundary AHE\RHE (Students on different courses. Vocational academic division)</td>
<td>Strong boundary AHE\RHE (Lower status entry qualification. Vocational curricula. Temporal and spatial separation. Much fewer resources for AHE students).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of Institutional Status (Low)</td>
<td>Weak boundary between institutions and governments (National classification of AHE predominates)</td>
<td>Strong framing separating AHE and RHE in institutions (students and courses segregated in institutions). (Studying AHE at high status institutions not valued)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and Social</td>
<td>Strong classification of AHE</td>
<td>Strong framing (AHE claim,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceptions of Students (Low) and RHE identities in university and once graduated (low entry qualifications, vocational curricula, low status, low confidence and social isolation).

Value of Qualification in Labour Market (Low) Strong Boundary (AHE qualification distinct and comparatively low value to RHE). Strong Boundary in terms of what AHE and RHE deemed suitable for.

Table 4. Mapping of classifications and framings onto Webb et al’s (2017) framework

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Studies of mature students globally indicate that new implicit hierarchies arise when universities open up access to them and the purpose of this paper was to develop and illustrate a framework for understanding the nature of these hierarchies and what constitutes them. We believe that Bernstein’s notion of pedagogic rights and Webb et al.’s (2017) model combined provide a useful framework. We have illustrated how using the framework systemically illustrated how the wider Chines HE system positioned AHE in universities and deeply in students’ identities in ways that make it extremely difficult to progress in a similar way to RHE students. Webb et al.’s framework brings out the structural effects of Chinese policy but our analysis of the codes embedded in classifications and framings at national and institutional level describes the complexity of the process by which students fail to gain access to pedagogic rights. Whilst we cannot argue from a small sample (30), that is entirely female, focused around two disciplinary areas (education and business-related studies) and based in two universities, this characterises the whole system, we believe that the value of the model is in mapping systems, and sub-systems of AHE and broadening out the framing of the desirable outcomes of AHE from often poorly conceptualised and reductionist notions of employability and social mobility to pedagogic rights acknowledges that more is needed for AHE students than skills.

Whilst national policy and stratification systems play an important role in determining AHE outcomes, universities and students have different degrees of control over what happens to students and what they get from university study. There is unlikely to be one way of achieving
desired outcomes for AHE students in all contexts and it is often easy to plan things in ways that have unintended outcomes. Using the proposed framework, it is possible to compare and explore the influence of the overall national structures and to understand the interrelated impacts of different parts of the system on students, universities and their practices and in fields of employment.

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