

Chapter 11

Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Higher Education in the Globalization: Neoliberal Challenges and Opportunities for Policies and Institutions



Weiyan Xiong

Abstract The neoliberal dimensions of globalization have significantly impacted the development of global higher education through a predominantly market-driven focus. In this context, ethnic minority and indigenous higher education in many countries face both challenges and opportunities for their dual missions of offering higher education and preserving ethnic and indigenous cultures, languages, and identities. This chapter analyses the impact of neoliberalism on ethnic minority and indigenous higher education policies and institutions in three countries, China, Canada, and the United States, and from the perspectives of three development models, which represent a centralized model in China, a decentralized model with strong government intervention in Canada, and a decentralized model with weak government influence in the USA.

Keywords Cultural identities · Ethnic minority · Global higher education reforms · Globalization · Higher education · Higher education policies · Indigenous cultures · Indigenous higher education · Identities · Neoliberalism

Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Higher Education in the Globalization: Introduction

Neoliberalism and its predominantly market-driven focus have shaped the higher education landscape in various aspects (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). Globalization, with the belief in free-market and free-trade for the global movement of goods, labor, and service (including education), has promoted its

W. Xiong (✉)
Lingnan University, Tuen Mun, Hong Kong
e-mail: weiyanyxiong@ln.edu.hk

neoliberal dimension to the higher education sectors (Zajda, 2021). Neoliberalism brings changes and reforms in higher education, including privatization, commercialization, global competition, and regarding higher education as private, rather than public goods (Zajda, 2020). College students are increasingly treated as consumers for the education service provided by universities and their faculty members (Saunders & Ramirez, 2017). Moreover, these neoliberal impacts on higher education have been advanced through the discourses and practices of internationalization, which is recognized as a response of the higher education sector to the challenges and opportunities brought by globalization (Bamberger et al., 2019; Zajda & Rust, 2021).

The impact of neoliberalism on higher education has been widely covered in the literature (e.g., Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019; Giroux, 2014; Manathunga & Bottrell, 2019; Zajda, 2021). However, the specific impact on ethnic minority and indigenous higher education¹ is under researched. In this chapter, ethnic minority and indigenous higher education refers to their group members receiving education offered by the mainstream colleges and universities, or the tribally controlled or ethnic minority-serving institutions. As the underrepresented groups in many countries and societies, ethnic minority and indigenous peoples struggle for equal higher education access and attainment, and their central or local governments have also implemented preferential policies for these groups (Jacob et al., 2015; Xiong, 2020; Zajda & Majhanovich, 2021). Notably, the ethnic minority or indigenous higher education institutions in many countries were established to serve the ethnic minority and indigenous peoples (Hallmark & Gasman, 2018).

Generally, ethnic minority and indigenous higher education and institutions serve a dual mission. One is to offer higher education to ethnic minority and indigenous groups. On the other hand, they serve the mission of preserving their cultures, languages, and identities through higher education (Jacob et al., 2015). In the globalization and neoliberal context, ethnic minority and indigenous higher education in many countries face both challenges and opportunities in realizing their dual missions. This chapter presents the impact of neoliberalism on ethnic minority and indigenous higher education policies and institutions in three countries—China, Canada, and the United States (US)—from the perspectives of three development models, which are a centralized model (China), a decentralized model with strong government intervention (Canada), and a decentralized model with weak government influence (the US). Under the general topic of this edited volume, which focuses on the discourses of globalization and higher education reforms, this chapter will review literature and policies related to ethnic minority and indigenous higher education in China, Canada, and the US and address the following two specific questions.

¹Because the term “indigenous” is not used in the Chinese context, this chapter adopts the term “ethnic minority and indigenous” to refer the chosen groups in this study, which are the officially recognized 55 ethnic minority groups in China, First Nations and Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada, and the American Indians and Alaska Natives in the US.

1. What are the challenges of the neoliberal dimensions of globalization for ethnic minority and indigenous higher education?
2. What are the opportunities of the neoliberal dimensions of globalization for ethnic minority and indigenous higher education?

The following sections first review three countries' ethnic minority and indigenous higher education policies and practices, then discuss the challenges and opportunities brought by the various aspects of the neoliberal dimensions. Finally, the implications for policymaking are presented.

Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Higher Education in Three Countries

This section reviews the different models of ethnic minority or indigenous higher education policies and practices through the lens of neoliberalism in China, Canada, and the US.

China: A Centralized Model

Chinese ethnic minority higher education has a strong policy orientation in a centralized education system to realize national unity (Clothey, 2005). Since the 1950s, the Chinese government has implemented various preferential policies to assist ethnic minority students in accessing higher education, like the point allowance in the national college entrance examination and college preparatory programs. In addition, the ethnic minority-serving institutions were also established to specifically serve ethnic minority students and communities and preserve their languages and cultures (Xiong, 2020).

Since the implementation of the *Reform and Opening-Up Policy* in 1978, neoliberalism has gradually led the market reforms in China, but with substantial government control. This neoliberal turn also impacted Chinese higher education (Gong & Dobinson, 2019; Jacob, 2004), and ethnic minority higher education was unavoidably influenced. The policy orientation of ethnic minority higher education for national unity and political stability becomes weaker than the previous. Ethnic institutions are forced to join the neoliberal competition game, fueled by the national policies in building world-class universities and enhancing internationalization level, to pursue comprehensive status and decent positions in the league tables (Choi, 2010). This change negatively impacts the dual mission realization of ethnic minority higher education and institutions, especially preserving ethnic cultures and languages. The neoliberal trends lead the ethnic minority higher education policies and practices to incline to cultivate talents to meet the challenges brought by

urbanization and modernization instead of preserving ethnic cultures and heritages (Wang, 2015).

The neoliberal trend has also impacted ethnic minority students' choices about higher education. Because of the domination of mainstream Han culture and Mandarin in job and life circumstances in China, it is a tough choice for ethnic minority students and their parents to keep learning their native languages. The expansion of higher education enrollment since the late 1990s and the increasingly competitive job market after graduation worsen this situation (Xiong et al., 2016).

Canada: A Decentralized Model with Strong Government Intervention

Despite the decentralized higher education system, the Canadian government has announced clear statements to set indigenization a national priority. Indigenization was granted equal significance as internationalization in higher education (Knutson, 2018). Specifically, the federal and provincial governments have issued relevant preferential policies for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples. At the federal level, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) makes efforts to reduce the educational gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people by optimizing relevant policies, like the publication of *CMEC Indigenous Education Plan 2019–22* (CMEC, 2019). At the provincial level, various policies were issued to facilitate indigenous higher education. For instance, as having the most indigenous peoples in Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Education sets indigenous education as one of its primary tasks and creates initiatives, like *Indigenous Education Policy Framework*, to improve indigenous peoples' education development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). In addition to the government support, some indigenous tribes have also established tribally controlled colleges to serve their people's higher education needs. These colleges are governed by the boards of tribal elders and community leaders but still under the regulation of their respective provincial ministry of education (Gregersen, 2015).

However, the indigenization process and higher education for indigenous peoples in Canada face barriers derived from the federal and provincial dichotomy and the solid Western and colonial traditions (Knutson, 2018). With the strong government involvement, Canadian indigenous higher education is easily influenced by neoliberal practices. Notably, some neoliberal education reforms have been criticized for their assimilation effect on indigenous peoples in Canada (Godlewska et al., 2013).

United States: A Decentralized Model with a Weak Government Influence

In the US, under the government-to-government relationship between American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) tribes and the US federal government and signed treaties, AIANs have a high level of self-determination and independence on their political, economic, cultural, and education affairs (Cornell & Kalt, 2010). Despite the funding assistance from the federal government, AIAN tribes have total control of their higher education, and the Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) were established to offer culturally relevant higher education to their people. AIAN higher education and TCUs strongly promote tribal nation building and preserve the indigenous knowledge system with culturally responsive education (Brayboy et al., 2012). Given the very high independence and limited intervention from the federal government, AIAN higher education and TCUs can avoid the neoliberal influences from the mainstream society and higher education and pursue their own definition of “institutional success,” which focuses on national building, language revitalization, and sovereignty enhancement (Brayboy et al., 2012). However, the isolation of AIAN higher education and TCUs leads to their marginalization status, which cannot bring sufficient social recognition to their efforts in preserving indigenous knowledge and external funding apart from the federal government (Xiong, 2020).

Discussion

The review of ethnic minority and indigenous higher education in China, Canada, and the US, from the perspective of neoliberalism, reveals the different ways of interaction between ethnic minority and indigenous higher education and the neoliberal trends in each country. In China, ethnic minority higher education and institutions follow the national neoliberalism-oriented higher education policies to avoid being left in the competition games. In Canada, higher education for indigenous peoples is promoted by different levels of government, but the barrier is also substantial due to the solid colonial background. Finally, in the US, AIAN higher education and TCUs enjoy high independence, but as a result, they are marginalized in the US higher education system. Given the different models, this section summarizes the common challenges and opportunities brought by the neoliberal trends to ethnic minority and indigenous higher education and the implications to the relevant policymakers and ethnic minority and indigenous institution administrators.

Neoliberal Challenges for Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Higher Education

The first challenge brought by neoliberalism for ethnic minority and indigenous higher education is the barrier to achieving the dual missions, especially the preservation of native languages, cultures, and identities (Zajda & Majhanovich, 2021). The homogenized and competition-oriented criteria of “success” in the neoliberal practices in higher education cannot well cover ethnic minority and indigenous higher education missions in various contexts, such as the tribal nation building for TCUs (Brayboy et al., 2012). At the same time, neoliberalism highlights the significance of competition, which can bring efficiency to the market and higher education sector (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). However, this competition orientation conflicts with the sharing spirit and culture of many ethnic minority and indigenous groups, especially the AIANs tribes in the US (Whitt, 2004).

The second challenge from neoliberalism for ethnic minority and indigenous higher education can be examined from the institutional perspective. The ethnic minority and indigenous institutions have been marginalized in the mainstream higher education sector. The competition from the neoliberal trend in higher education brings an additional burden to these institutions. For example, in China, ethnic minority-serving institutions are treated as policy-oriented institutions to serve as a tool in implementing ethnic minority policies and realizing harmonious development of all ethnic groups in China. With the influences from neoliberalism in higher education, pursuing the comprehensive university status and increasing the ranks in the major higher education league tables have brought the burden for ethnic minority-serving institutions and diluted their efforts in preserving ethnic cultures and languages (Xiong, 2020).

Neoliberal Opportunities for Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Higher Education

Regarding the opportunities brought by the neoliberal dimension of globalization, first, ethnic minority and indigenous higher education and institutions can take advantage of the neoliberal “game” to obtain necessary resources and support. More importantly, active engagement is a way of demonstrating the efforts of ethnic minority and indigenous higher education institutions in preserving native cultures and languages to the mainstream society.

Furthermore, in some particular cases, if the market force works in the right way, ethnic minority or indigenous groups can apply it to promote the native languages and cultures. For example, Korean Chinese is famous for the high-quality higher education with excellent preservation of the Korean language and culture. One reason for this phenomenon is the existence of South Korea near the prefecture, which serves as a decent job market for Korean Chinese college graduates (Xiong & Jacob, 2020). However, this situation is unique due to the geographic location and the same

ethnic origin and language. Even though this positive influence cannot be repeated for many other ethnic or indigenous groups, the pragmatic implication regarding the opportunities brought by the neoliberal trends is that economic benefit is a strong incentive for ethnic minority and indigenous people to preserve their languages and cultures (Xiong et al., 2016).

Finally, under the impact of the ongoing Fourth Industrial Revolution, soft skills, including multicultural competency, have been increasingly emphasized by higher education institutions when training their students for future career development (Mok et al., 2021). Ethnic minority and indigenous higher education can enjoy the advantages and experiences of offering intercultural training in the interaction between their own culture and mainstream one. In this sense, the increasingly trending skills set can provide ethnic minority and indigenous higher education the opportunities to promote their significance in each higher education system and the broader multicultural context of globalization. However, because the Fourth Industrial Revolution is still developing, the opportunities in this sense for ethnic minority and indigenous higher education need further investigation.

Implications for Policymaking and Institutional Development

After reviewing challenges and opportunities brought by neoliberalism to ethnic minority and indigenous higher education, this chapter summarizes the following implications for policymaking and institutional development. First, for the central and local governments, education ministries, and accreditation bodies, it is crucial to understand the different criteria of “success” of the institutional development to help ethnic minority and indigenous higher education institutions, like TCUs, realize their dual missions of offering higher education and preserving native languages, cultures, and identities. These criteria are differentiated from the mainstream ones, which are the products of the neoliberalism-fueled competition, such as the high rankings in the league tables and comprehensiveness with all disciplines (Stull et al., 2015).

Second, for ethnic minority and indigenous higher education and institutions, it is not wise to entirely escape from the mainstream culture to preserve their own (Brayboy et al., 2012), and it is also impossible to do so for institutions in the centralized higher education system like China. The dual mission realization of ethnic minority and indigenous higher education should ultimately serve their students and prepare their graduates for both native and mainstream worlds. As Stein (2009) took TCUs as an example, “they could not just prepare tribal students to be proficient in their cultures but must also prepare them to be proficient in the non-Indian world that surrounds the tribal communities. They had to prepare their students to live productively in two very different worlds” (p. 18). Therefore, ethnic minority and indigenous institutional leaders need to balance their missions through carefully evaluating and applying the opportunities brought by the neoliberal trends in higher education, such as the national preferential policies (China and Canada) and the increasing attention to intercultural skills in the future job market.

Conclusion

In three case countries, namely China, Canada, and the United States, ethnic minority and indigenous peoples and institutions use different strategies to deal with the challenges and opportunities brought by the neoliberal trends in globalization. When discussing the conflict between neoliberalism and ethnic minority and indigenous higher education, one crucial question is how we should treat students. Are they customers who will bring the university tuition fees and reputation when they succeed after graduation? Or are they the agents of their own cultures, languages, and identities to co-construct the classroom and the university? For the advocate for the latter perspective, it is unfortunate to see the neoliberal trends are gradually weakening students' agent roles, especially for their ethnic and indigenous heritage. Therefore, educational policymakers and other ethnic minority and indigenous higher education stakeholders should step out to take actions, not only to facilitate the realization of the dual missions in offering culturally relevant education and preserving native cultures but also, more importantly, to protect the diversity that has been facing a considerable threat from the globalization and the neoliberal trends.

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