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Higher Education under decentralized governance: contrasts and convergences between Canada and China

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Abstract

This study examines whether the benefits of decentralized governance in Higher Education can be empirically observed through a comparative analysis of Canada and China. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, based on a multiple case study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with government representatives and open-ended questionnaires applied to specialists and student leaders. The analysis followed a categorical content approach, guided by governance, funding, and equity dimensions. The findings show that decentralization produces different outcomes depending on the institutional context. In Canada, it is associated with high autonomy and flexibility, but also coordination challenges and regional disparities. In China, it operates under strong central coordination, supporting expansion while raising concerns about quality and inequality. The study concludes that decentralization is context-dependent and suggests balancing central coordination with regional autonomy, alongside mechanisms to reduce inequalities and improve policy coherence.

Keywords: Decentralization. Higher Education. Governance. Funding. Equity. Canada. China.

1 Introduction

Higher Education has long played a fundamental role in national development, with its importance intensifying in recent decades due to new forms of work and the strategic value of information. Advances in access and speed of information

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have reshaped economic and social dynamics, reinforcing the role of Education in preparing human capital.

In this context, Higher Education is increasingly seen as a key factor for countries to engage in globalization and achieve sustained growth. It contributes to the development of intellectual capital necessary to meet national demands across sectors.

Canada, for example, has consistently invested in Higher Education, achieving high enrollment rates among individuals aged 18 to 24 (Haddad; Graciano, 2004; Choi; Hou, 2023). The country also stands out in global rankings, with five universities among the top 100 in the January 2024 Webometrics ranking, including the University of Toronto (16th), the University of British Columbia (25th), and McGill University (61st) (Webometrics, 2024).

Similarly, China has made substantial investments in Education, producing significant results in both basic and Higher Education. Institutions such as Tsinghua University (20th), Peking University (23rd), and Zhejiang University (57th) are among the world's leading universities (Webometrics, 2024). This trend reflects a broader development strategy, as highlighted by Mahmood and Singh (2003), Liu (2018), and Song (2018), emphasizing Education as a driver of national growth.

Both countries adopt decentralized governance structures, based on the assumption that provincial autonomy enhances responsiveness to local needs and supports access and retention in Higher Education. In this context, this study aims to assess whether the benefits associated with decentralization can be observed in these two large-scale Education systems.

2 Theoretical Framework

This section examines key debates on centralization and decentralization in Higher Education, focusing on governance models, institutional autonomy, and funding mechanisms. It also explores implications for equity, efficiency, and policy coordination, and proposes an analytical framework to guide the comparative analysis.

2.1 Centralization and Decentralization in Higher Education

Higher Education systems can be positioned along a continuum from centralized to decentralized governance. Centralization concentrates decision-making authority

at the national level, with strong coordination and standardized policies, whereas decentralization transfers authority to subnational governments or institutions, increasing flexibility and responsiveness to local needs (Fisher *et al.,* 2006; Trilokekar; Jones; Tamtik, 2020).

These models involve trade-offs. Decentralized systems tend to promote autonomy, innovation, and adaptability, enabling institutions to respond to regional demands, but may increase disparities, policy inconsistencies, and coordination challenges (Cameron, 1992; Wu, 2006; Lang, 2022). Centralized systems, in turn, facilitate policy coherence, national planning, and redistribution, aligning Education with broader development goals, though they may constrain autonomy and reduce flexibility and responsiveness (Zha, 2009; Hayhoe; Zha, 2004).

In practice, most systems combine elements of both models, forming hybrid arrangements in which authority is distributed across multiple levels and shaped by historical, political, and economic contexts (Sheremet *et al.,* 2024).

2.2 Governance, Autonomy, and Funding Structures

Governance in Higher Education is closely linked to the distribution of authority and institutional autonomy, which encompasses academic, administrative, and financial dimensions (Trilokekar; Jones, 2007). In decentralized systems, higher autonomy can foster competition, diversification, and innovation, but may also generate fragmentation and coordination challenges (Fisher *et al.,* 2006; Sheremet *et al.,* 2024).

Funding mechanisms are central to governance arrangements, ranging from predominantly public models to mixed systems combining public funding, tuition fees, and private contributions (Motala, 2023). In decentralized contexts, shared funding responsibilities increase exposure to regional economic conditions, potentially leading to unequal resource distribution. Centralized funding, by contrast, can enhance redistribution and equity, although it may reduce financial autonomy (Cameron, 2004; Wu, 2006; Motala, 2023; Sheremet *et al.,* 2024). Governance and funding are therefore interdependent in shaping system outcomes.

2.3 Implications for Equity, Efficiency, and Policy Coordination

Centralization has important implications for equity, efficiency, and policy coordination (As-Siddiqi; El-Bukhary, 2025). Centralized systems tend to reduce regional disparities through redistributive mechanisms, whereas decentralized

systems may intensify inequalities due to variations in regional capacity (Wu, 2006; Li, 2019; Sheremet *et al.,* 2024).

Regarding efficiency, decentralization can enhance responsiveness and innovation, but may generate duplication and coordination problems. Centralization may offer economies of scale and strategic alignment, though it risks rigidity and bureaucratization (As-Siddiqi; El-Bukhary, 2025; Sheremet *et al.,* 2024).

Policy coordination also differs across models: centralized systems facilitate coherent national strategies, while decentralized ones often face alignment challenges, potentially leading to fragmented outcomes (Cameron, 1992; Trilokekar; Jones, 2007; Lang, 2022).

2.4 Analytical Framework

Based on this discussion, the study adopts three analytical dimensions: (i) governance and distribution of authority, (ii) funding structure and financial autonomy, and (iii) equity and regional disparities. These dimensions guide the interpretation of empirical findings by country and stakeholder group, enabling the analysis of how decentralization in governance arrangements influences system performance and associated trade-offs.

3 Context of Higher Education Systems

This section provides a historical and institutional overview of Higher Education systems in Canada and China, contextualizing the empirical findings by highlighting their main structural characteristics, governance arrangements, and funding dynamics.

3.1 The Canadian Higher Education System: Historical and Institutional Context

The expansion of Higher Education in Canada began after World War II, with federal financial support focused on university research. In 1951, a commission recommended direct funding to universities, initiating institutional financial autonomy. In 1967, a government act established that the federal government would cover 50% of provincial operational costs in Higher Education, driving expansion and marking the beginning of decentralization (Fedalto, 2001; Rockerbie; Easton, 2024).

Universities subsequently spread across the country, with provinces establishing their own institutions, similar to the United States model (Loureiro, 1986). However, decentralization created challenges in uniformity, as provinces assumed responsibility for Higher Education and funding became subject to local priorities (Fisher *et al.,* 2006; Rockerbie; Easton, 2024). During Brian Mulroney's government (1984–1993), federal transfer cuts intensified these pressures, leading provinces to seek alternative funding sources (Cameron, 2004).

In this decentralized system, provinces are primarily responsible for maintaining universities (Trilokekar; Jones, 2007). Funding is shared, with the federal government contributing about 60%, municipalities 15%, and tuition fees and private sources 25% (Sguissardi, 2003; Trilokekar; Jones; Tamtik, 2020). Although federal investment reaches approximately 11 billion dollars annually, tuition fees vary significantly across provinces, exceeding 100% differences between Quebec ($3,359) and provinces such as Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada, 2023). Provinces accounted for 34.0% of total university revenue in 2022/2023, down from 38.6% in 2013/2014 (Statistics Canada, 2024).

Despite its strong international reputation, the system faces coordination challenges. The absence of a central authority limits policy coherence and may generate regional conflicts (Cameron, 1992; Lang, 2022). Trilokekar and Jones (2007) emphasize the need for improved coordination among federal actors, particularly given the absence of a national ministry of Education.

3.2 The Chinese Higher Education System: Historical and Institutional Context

Education has long been central to China's development, influenced by Confucian principles emphasizing its societal role (Min, 2004; Bahtilla; Xu, 2021). More recently, Higher Education has been recognized as essential for workforce qualification and technological advancement (Hayhoe; Zha, 2004; Min, 2008; Song, 2018).

The expansion of Higher Education is largely attributed to strong state coordination, described as the "visible hand" of government policy (Zha; Hayhoe, 2008; Costa; Zha, 2020). In 1980, the Ministry of Education initiated reforms focused on expanding Basic Education, restructuring Secondary Education, and strengthening Higher Education. In 1985, reforms promoted greater institutional autonomy while maintaining alignment with state priorities (CCCCP, 1985).

The 1993 "Outline for Educational Reform and Development" reinforced decentralization, institutional autonomy, and funding diversification, later formalized by the 1999 Higher Education Law (Zha, 2009). While decentralization increased regional autonomy, it also intensified disparities in access due to uneven economic development (Wu, 2006; Li, 2019). Interprovincial financial balance remains a challenge (Wei, 2004), although expansion has been significant, with enrollments rising from 2.3 million in 1986 to 5.2 million in 1994 (World Bank, 1997).

By 2023, China had over 47.63 million Higher Education students, including 10.42 million in universities and vocational institutions and 1.3 million in graduate programs. The system comprised 3,074 institutions, with a gross enrollment rate of 60.2% (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

4 Methodology

In this study, an exploratory research approach was chosen to analyze the decentralization of Higher Education in two culturally and economically distinct countries: Canada and China. The research was conducted through a comparative analysis, which, according to Schneider and Schimitt (1998), allows for a better understanding of phenomena by comparing different contexts.

However, it is important to note that one limitation of this comparative study relates to the different political and institutional contexts in which the data were collected. In particular, it is important to recognize that participants in China may operate in a more centralized political environment, which may influence the degree of openness in expressing critical opinions. This potential asymmetry was taken into account in the interpretation of the results, especially when comparing perceptions across countries.

Although Higher Education encompasses a diverse set of institutions, including colleges and vocational Education providers, this study focuses primarily on universities. This choice reflects the central role of universities in national Higher Education systems, as well as the profile of the stakeholders involved in this research.

Data collection techniques with a direct approach were employed, through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, focusing on the key stakeholders of the educational system. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, based on their direct involvement and expertise in Higher Education governance.

Government leaders were chosen due to their roles in policy design and implementation. Higher Education specialists were selected based on their academic background and research activity in the field. Student leaders were included to provide perspectives on how governance structures affect the student experience. The selection aimed to ensure diversity of viewpoints across institutional and regional contexts in both countries.

All participants were informed about the objectives of the research and voluntarily agreed to participate. In order to ensure confidentiality and comply with research ethics standards, all interviewees and respondents were anonymized. Identifying information such as personal names was omitted, and organizational affiliations were presented at an aggregated or generic level when necessary.

The list of interviewees is presented in Table 1, including the institution or agency represented, the designation used, the interview location, and a note on the mode of conduction (in-person or via videoconference).

Table 1 – Interviewees: Government Leaders

Canada				
Designation	**Organization Type**	**Position**	**Location**	**Notes**
Interviewee 1	Intergovernmental organization	Senior policy officer	Western Canada	Videoconference
Interviewee 2	Provincial Higher Education body	Senior administrator	Ontario	In-person
Interviewee 3	Provincial ministry	Policy analyst	Ontario	In-person
Interviewee 4	Provincial agency for Higher Education quality	Executive officer	Ontario	In-person
Interviewee 5*	Higher Education consulting organization	Senior consultant	Ontario	In-person
China				
Interviewee 6	Central government agency	Senior official	Beijing	Videoconference
Interviewee 7	Central government agency	Researcher	Beijing	Videoconference
Interviewee 8	National research institute in Education	Researcher	Beijing	Videoconference

Source: Author (2024).
*Note: Interviewee 5 represents a consulting organization that provides advisory services to government bodies in Higher Education policy.

To investigate the perception of Higher Education specialists and student leaders in the three countries, questionnaires were used as data collection instruments. The questionnaires were designed with open-ended questions, allowing respondents to elaborate on their perceptions regarding the advantages, challenges, and impacts of decentralized governance in Higher Education. The questions were structured around key themes such as governance arrangements, funding mechanisms, coordination between levels of government, and perceived effects on access, quality, and regional equity.

Tables 2 and 3 present the Higher Education specialists and student leaders who responded to the questionnaires, providing the designation used in the research, the university and faculty to which the specialist is affiliated, along with a note indicating whether the responses were submitted via a dedicated website or by email.

Table 2 – Respondents: Higher Education Specialists

Canada			
Designation	**Institution Type**	**Field**	**Notes**
Respondent 1	Public university	Education	Online platform
Respondent 2	Public university	Social Sciences	Online platform
Respondent 3	Public university	Liberal Arts and Professional Studies	Online platform
Respondent 4	Public university	Education	Online platform
Respondent 5	Public university	Environmental Studies	Online platform
Respondent 6	Public university	Environmental Studies	Online platform
China			
Respondent 9	Public university	Education	E-mail
Respondent 10	Public university	Business	Online platform
Respondent 11	Public university	Education Sciences	Online platform
Respondent 12	Public university	Education	Online platform

Continue

Continuation

Respondent 13	Public university	Higher Education	Online platform
Respondent 14	Public university	Education	Online platform
Respondent 15	Public university	Education	Online platform
Respondent 16	Public university	Education	Online platform

Source: Author (2024)

Although some respondents are affiliated with institutions that maintain international collaborations, participant selection was based on expertise, and no evidence of bias affecting the results was observed.

Table 3 – Respondents: Student Leaders

Canada			
Designation	**Organization Type**	**Role**	**Notes**
Respondent 7	National student association	Policy analyst	Online platform
Respondent 8	Regional student association	Research director	Online platform
China			
Respondent 17	University student association	Member	Online platform

Source: Author (2024)

For the qualitative analysis, the data from unstructured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the categorical content analysis technique. The analysis followed a categorical content analysis approach. Initially, all interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were read in full to ensure data familiarization. Subsequently, an initial coding process was conducted, identifying recurring themes related to governance, funding, and equity. These themes were then grouped into analytical categories aligned with the theoretical framework.

The coding process combined both deductive and inductive approaches: deductive categories were derived from the literature, while additional categories

emerged from the data during analysis. The use of MAXQDA 2022 supported the organization, coding, and comparison of data across stakeholder groups and countries, enhancing the consistency and transparency of the analytical process.

5 Results

The results are presented by country and stakeholder group, allowing for a detailed understanding of the perceptions of government representatives, specialists, and student leaders. These findings are interpreted in light of the analytical dimensions discussed in the theoretical framework, particularly governance structures, funding arrangements, and issues related to equity and regional disparities.

5.1 Canada and the Challenges and Opportunities in the Decentralization of Higher Education Management

In Canada, the management of Higher Education is decentralized and the responsibility of the provinces. The federal government transfers resources to the provinces, which apply them according to their priorities. Each province has the autonomy to define rules, academic fees, student assistance policies (supplemented by federal guidelines), and other actions.

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), represented in this research by Interviewee 1, promotes dialogue among provincial ministers. According to the Interviewee, the CMEC functions as a space for the exchange of ideas and the construction of adaptable frameworks, without imposing solutions. The goal is to stimulate joint learning and policies that each province can apply according to its reality.

This section aims to understand, from the perspective of the key stakeholders, the challenges and opportunities resulting from the decentralized management of Higher Education funding, as well as any potential convergences in provincial decisions.

a) Government

Most of the government leaders interviewed see the decentralization of educational management as the most suitable structure for the country's needs, with few criticisms of the model. According to Interviewee 2, this setup works due to the Canadian commitment to building a strong public system, as there is no private Education in the country. This perception reflects the predominance of public institutions in the Canadian Higher Education system, although private institutions

and market-oriented dynamics are also present, particularly through tuition structures and private colleges. Thus, although decentralized, the system is guided by a common philosophy of collaboration. Interviewee 1 agrees, highlighting that many do not understand how this arrangement proves to be effective:

> [...] if people are looking for unity, they will be disappointed, because that's not how Canada operates. And you don't need unanimous decisions in every area to promote coherence between the systems. It may take more effort and time than having a central government that says, "Here is the policy, and we really don't care whether you liked it or not!..." (INTERVIEWEE 1).

Interviewee 4 reinforces this dynamic, highlighting that the provinces constantly cooperate, driven by the semi-annual CMEC meetings. When a topic is prioritized, specific meetings are held, such as in the case of student assistance a federal program developed in partnership with all the provinces that requires frequent meetings for its management.

To illustrate this mechanism, Interviewee 1 cites the impact of the Bologna Process in the creation of the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework. The ministers agreed to adopt a common framework based on skill levels for academic degrees. Although each province maintains autonomy, there was a collective commitment to align new programs with the agreed-upon framework, providing greater coherence to the system. This collaborative model was also replicated for credit transfers and, especially, for the recognition of interprovincial student benefits a milestone achieved two decades ago:

> For example, if you decided to leave Ontario and study in Saskatchewan, the Ontario government would not provide any funding for that. But, probably twenty to twenty-five years ago, this became absolutely possible to go anywhere while keeping your student benefits, to cover your student expenses regardless of where you are (INTERVIEWEE 1).

Although the management of educational funding is provincial, the federal government's role is relevant in three areas: research funding, student financial assistance (shared with the provinces), and the so-called Canada Social Health Transfer a resource transfer based on the fiscal revenue of each province, allocated to Education, health, and social programs. The federal government,

however, does not determine how the funds should be applied, respecting jurisdictional autonomy.

Regarding Higher Education funding, Interviewee 2 considers the model fair, due to the existence of an "equalizer" that compensates for disparities between more and less developed provinces. Resources from provinces like Ontario are redistributed through the federal government to others with lower fiscal capacity a mechanism known as the "equalization formula".

> Some provinces have oil, and some provinces have a very depressed economy, such as on the East Coast, where the economy is based on fishing, so the federal government equalizes through transfers (INTERVIEWEE 4).

This decentralization allows universities to respond better to local demands. Interviewee 2 cites the example of Saskatchewan, which uses resources to promote courses focused on mining, a relevant sector in the region.

Despite the advantages, there are criticisms. Interviewee 5 notes that there is no full unity among the provinces, but rather similar reactions to external pressures, favored by institutional isomorphism. Although there is no formal benchmark, effective practices can be replicated. Interviewee 3 also highlights the importance of cooperation:

> Regarding the interprovincial relationship, I believe they should collaborate more, but there is dialogue between them. In the specific case of Ontario, we always research what the other provinces are doing and make sure to always establish contact with them (INTERVIEWEE 3).

Even with the limitations, Interviewee 1 sees the system as a large ship: changes happen, albeit slowly. For him, the absence of centralized decisions is not a flaw:

> In Canada, sometimes it is hard to imagine that you can write the perfect public policy that will work equally effectively in a country as large as ours, with demographic differences, with differences in cultural backgrounds. (INTERVIEWEE 1).

Confident in the effectiveness of the model, the leader concludes:

> [...] some people in Canada criticize our approach to Education in the country, saying that it is not centrally organized, that it is not decided by a federal government, and that this cannot be good. And I have rarely heard a good explanation about what problem needs to be solved where the solution is more centralized power. So, I often say... I think these people already have the solution and are looking for a problem (INTERVIEWEE 1).

b) Specialists

The specialists have varied opinions on the challenges and opportunities of decentralized management in Higher Education. Some criticize the lack of unity, while others believe that the provinces tend to adopt similar paths.

Respondent 1 notes that, despite general similarities, the provinces treat the sector in distinct ways, with British Columbia having more integration between universities and colleges than Ontario. However, the governments are moving toward greater integration, although Ontario's universities resist this. Respondent 2 also believes that the provinces follow similar directions, with the exception of Quebec, which is unique. Respondent 3 highlights that the provinces tend to copy each other, and a centralized system could improve Canada's image abroad, attracting international students.

> Everyone looks at other jurisdictions, at successes and best practices, in an attempt to implement them in their own systems, but I don't see organized unity in the decisions among the provinces (RESPONDENT 5).

Respondent 4 points out that the biggest challenge of decentralized management is ensuring quality undergraduate Education, as universities have other priorities and federal control is limited. For Respondent 1, Ontario benefits from a large system that allows for collective pressure for more resources, while smaller provinces do not have this advantage.

> Ontario has the advantage of having a large system so that universities can collectively, through the Council of Ontario Universities (COS), pressure the government. However, they still compete individually for resources. The governments of other provinces, being smaller, may be more influenced in their universities, which can limit some of their autonomy (RESPONDENT 1).

On the other hand, Respondent 6 criticizes the funding in Ontario, stating that, despite the province being the most populous, it offers the lowest per capita funding. This leads universities to face budget cuts, hiring freezes, and the search for part-time professors. Respondent 5 also sees challenges due to the lack of unity among the provinces, which weakens the universities in a scenario of rising costs and limited affordability. He advocates for the need to focus on accountability to ensure that universities provide the best return on invested resources.

c) Student Leaders

Student leaders acknowledge the advantages and challenges of decentralized management but highlight obstacles faced by students that contrast with the progress pointed out by Interviewee 1.

For Respondent 8, decentralization allows for greater sensitivity to local needs, such as in provinces with a significant rural population. He also cites as a benefit the possibility of budgetary prioritization, exemplified by Quebec, which keeps domestic tuition fees more affordable.

On the other hand, the challenges are significant. Respondent 7 criticizes the preferences given to students from the province of origin, which hinders student mobility and harms students from smaller provinces. Respondent 8 adds that there is a lack of clarity regarding the costs of studying in other provinces, as well as difficulties with federal/provincial student loans and credit transfer between jurisdictions. The economic inequality between provinces also affects support for students.

> Moreover, because the economic health of different provinces varies, some regions are able to be more generous with financial aid to students (RESPONDENT 7).

According to Respondent 7, each province manages its own assistance programs and regulates tuition fees, with little adoption of common decisions among them, despite some isomorphic practices between institutions.

> Nova Scotia has a robust community college system, where most places have individual colleges. British Columbia has more layers of Higher Education and greater mobility. Alberta has a more comprehensive student loan system in terms of unmet needs, but it has fewer scholarships than Ontario (RESPONDENT 7).

Finally, Respondent 8 believes that the unity and centralization of the system can be identified in some nationwide assistance programs, where a degree of coordination is observed in policy areas, but in other areas and policies, this is not observed.

5.2 China and the Roles of Central and Provincial Governments in Higher Education Management

In contrast to Canada, where decentralization is embedded in a federal and democratic political structure, the Chinese Higher Education system operates within a centralized political regime, in which decentralization occurs under strong central coordination. This distinction is crucial for interpreting the findings, as it suggests that decentralization may assume different meanings and operational logics depending on the broader political and institutional context.

Starting from this assumption and seeking to understand viable alternatives for other systems, the participants were surveyed to explore the role of the central government and provincial governments in the expansion of Chinese Higher Education. The aim was also to understand whether stakeholders perceive any form of unity in the decisions made between the provinces.

a) Government

The leaders generally outlined the roles of the government levels in China, with the central government being responsible for defining the strategy and the goals to be achieved, and the provincial governments acting as executors of the strategies, with some autonomy at the jurisdictional leve.

> In summary, the central government creates the policies, and the provincial governments must apply and implement these policies as defined, under the supervision of the central government (INTERVIEWEE 8).

Detailing a bit more about the role of the national or central government, Interviewee 7 explains that it is responsible for creating policies and planning, and for setting the standards for Higher Education. As a complement to this information, Interviewee 6 adds that the central government sets the goals, and the local governments try to achieve them.

> So, if the government says that we are going to expand the system at a specific rate, the provinces begin to work towards meeting this goal (INTERVIEWEE 7).

Interviewee 7 explains that when analyzing the specific point that guided the expansion of Chinese Higher Education, the central government was directly responsible for creating the macro policies, providing its guidance, and overseeing the implementation. The provincial governments were then responsible for implementing the policies. Although he did not perceive unity in the decisions made between the provinces, all followed the guidance of the central government, as exemplified by Interviewee 6.

> For example, the Central Government may set a target for new enrollments to be achieved in the coming years, but in the process of seeking and implementing this goal, it is the provincial government that will try to achieve it (INTERVIEWEE 6).

Starting from this assumption, the central government was then responsible for the indicators of growth in Higher Education, which affected all provinces.

Interviewee 6 mentions that, in the process of expanding Higher Education in recent decades, many provincial governments competed with each other to increase the number of students enrolled in their respective provinces. This had a positive impact, as competition was created between the provinces, which sought new strategies to increase enrollment numbers. However, it also had a negative impact on quality, as the provinces were more focused on increasing the number of students without paying much attention to quality.

Finally, Interviewee 7 admits that there is now a great concern with quality, which was neglected for a time in favor of focusing only on number.

b) Specialists

For Higher Education specialists, the central government is still the one that sets the rules, and the provincial government, endowed with some autonomy, tries to follow them as best as possible. However, it was observed in some cases that provincial governments managed to surpass the goals set by the central government, showing that in some jurisdictions, modifications originating solely at the provincial level began to be observed.

According to Respondent 13, both the central government and the provincial government play a role in the expansion of Chinese Higher Education. The provincial government is primarily responsible for investments in the development of Higher Education institutions affiliated with the authority of that jurisdiction. The specific levels of investment and management in the Higher Education sectors vary from province to province, something that is also supported by Respondent 14.

> In China, the central government played the main role, and the provincial governments implemented the Higher Education expansion policies proposed by the central Chinese government, although the provincial governments have some autonomy (RESPONDENT 14).

This statement is also shared by Respondents 10 and 15, who perceive that the expansion policy started from the central government, but it was the provincial government that put it into practice. In other words, joint action was necessary to achieve success.

> I think the central government initiated the policy, and the provincial government is happy to participate. It is a kind of unity in decision-making (RESPONDENT 16).

Contrary to others, who advocate for a certain submission in the relationship between the central government and provincial governments, Respondent 12 explains that provinces do not always wait for the central government's decisions to define their strategies. The expert mentions that the more prosperous provinces on the coastal areas have been more ambitious in their expansion plans and have often leapfrogged ahead of national policies. Due to the economic power of these provinces, the central government, represented by the Ministry of Education, faces some difficulties in controlling them.

Nevertheless, the central government's role in the expansion of Higher Education is unquestionable, as it treated this demand as a state policy. Respondent 11 reports that the central government played a predominant role in the development of Higher Education in the past two decades, mainly achieving the massification of Higher Education through the issuance of a series of documents and policies. The provincial governments needed to distribute local finances for the development of Higher Education, not only for the provincial expansion of Higher Education but also to meet the target set by the central government.

> In fact, most provincial governments do the same things to expand their scale in Higher Education, such as increasing the size of university campuses, establishing new university towns in the suburbs, and encouraging companies and individuals to establish private Higher Education institutions (RESPONDENT 11).

Finally, Respondent 9 reflects that the central government did indeed play a fundamental role in the expansion process, but now, provincial governments will need to play an increasingly larger role in coordinating Higher Education in their jurisdictions. In other words, there is gradually a greater pursuit of autonomy, especially in the more developed provinces.

> In fact, many provincial governments reacted to the central government's decision to expand enrollments in Higher Education, and as a result, the actual outcomes exceeded the plan presented by the central government. Thus, unity is still the norm, but provincial-level modifications are increasingly being observed (RESPONDENT 9).

c) Student Leadership

Although recognizing the role of the central government as the main orchestrator of the directions taken by Higher Education in the provinces, Respondent 17 admitted to being unfamiliar with this matter, as it is an issue addressed at the governmental level (central and provincial) and does not directly interfere with student daily life. However, she mentions that the significant economic gap between the provinces creates a differentiation in student Education, as the programs in more developed provinces tend to have higher quality, leading to an imbalance in the system. This situation causes part of the student population to migrate to the east in search of training that will provide greater recognition in the job market. However, this process has negative impacts on the less favored provinces, as they lose much of their intellectual capital, which could help progress in their home province, posing challenges for both the Central and provincial governments.

5.3 Cross-Case Comparison Across Analytical Dimensions

A cross-case comparison based on the analytical dimensions highlights important contrasts and convergences between Canada and China.

In terms of governance, Canada exhibits a highly decentralized model, with decision-making authority concentrated at the provincial level and no central ministry of Education, whereas China operates under a centrally coordinated system in which decentralization occurs within clearly defined national guidelines.

Regarding funding structures, Canada relies on a mixed model with significant provincial responsibility and variation across regions, while China combines strong central direction with increasing provincial financial engagement, particularly in the expansion phase.

From the perspective of equity, both systems face regional disparities, although they address them differently: Canada through redistributive mechanisms such as equalization transfers, and China through centrally defined expansion targets combined with uneven provincial capacity. These findings reinforce that decentralization is not a uniform phenomenon, but rather a context-dependent arrangement shaped by institutional and political configurations.

6 Conclusion

After conducting the research, it was possible to identify the different perceptions regarding the benefits promoted by the decentralization of Higher Education.

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of decentralization in Higher Education is highly dependent on the broader political, economic, and institutional context in which it is implemented. While both Canada and China adopt decentralized elements, the nature and outcomes of decentralization differ significantly due to their distinct governance structures and historical trajectories.

The research showed that in the Canadian case, decentralization is complete, with the absence of a national Ministry of Education. In China, although the management is decentralized, there is the central role of the Ministry of Education responsible for deliberating national strategies, with the provinces being in charge of defining specific actions to fulfill the established direction. Regardless of the model, both countries expressed satisfaction with their management structure.

For the Canadian participants, this is the best structure to meet the country's needs, as it is sensitive to regional demands. The lack of unity sometimes makes management difficult, but the provinces tend to follow successful initiatives implemented by others.

In the case of China, the importance of the central government, which sets the strategies to be followed, was never overlooked. The autonomy at the jurisdictional level represented a differentiating factor for expansion, as it motivated the provinces to seek alternatives that broadened access to Higher Education, which showed a direct relationship with the country's economic performance.

When analyzing the two extremes, centralized or decentralized structures, both positive and negative points can be observed, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 – Centralized Structure vs. Decentralized Structure

Type of Structure	Centralized	Decentralized
Positive Points	• Unity in decision-making; • Greater ease in communicating strategies; • Autonomy of a central mechanism to define public funding to be allocated; and • Greater adherence to public policies defined by the federal government.	• Sensitivity to local demands; • Fairer transfers to the state and universities; • Agility in problem-solving; • Autonomy to create public policies; and • The results have an impact on the economic development of their own jurisdictions.
Negative Points	• Lack of flexibility; • Decision-making does not address all regional needs; • Unfair fund transfers for some states/provinces that collect more than they receive.	• Communication problems between states • Lack of national unity in decision-making; and • Difficulty in implementing macro measures.

Source: Author (2024)

Based on the empirical findings, particularly the differences observed across governance, funding, and equity dimensions, this study identifies a set of general principles that may guide the design of Higher Education governance systems in different contexts. These principles include:

a) the importance of balancing central coordination with regional autonomy, reflecting the Canadian experience of flexibility and the Chinese model of strategic alignment;

b) the role of national authorities in defining broad strategic goals, while allowing subnational entities flexibility in implementation;

c) the need for funding mechanisms that combine local responsibility with redistributive instruments to address regional inequalities;

d) the relevance of accountability and monitoring systems aligned with national priorities;

e) the value of coordination mechanisms between different levels of government;

f) the importance of ensuring student mobility and policy coherence across regions; and

g) the possibility for subnational entities to develop complementary policies adapted to local needs.

Finally, considering the benefits and challenges highlighted by the Canadian and Chinese participants, it is suggested that other countries reflect on granting some autonomy to states or provinces in the management of Higher Education, particularly in the allocation of the funding that is collected. The aim of this initiative is to make Higher Education institutions more sensitive to regional demands and to establish them as drivers of progress in the environment in which they are embedded.

Educação Superior sob gestão descentralizada: contrastes e convergências entre Canadá e China

Resumo

Este estudo analisa se os benefícios da descentralização na governança da educação superior podem ser evidenciados empiricamente, por meio de uma análise comparativa entre Canadá e China. Adotou-se abordagem qualitativa exploratória, com delineamento de estudo multicaso. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com representantes governamentais e questionários abertos aplicados a especialistas e lideranças estudantis. A análise seguiu a técnica de análise de conteúdo categorial, orientada pelas dimensões de governança, financiamento e equidade. Os resultados indicam que a descentralização produz efeitos distintos conforme o contexto institucional. No Canadá, está associada à autonomia e flexibilidade, mas também a desafios de coordenação e desigualdades regionais. Na China, ocorre sob forte coordenação central, favorecendo a expansão, porém com desafios relacionados à qualidade e à equidade. Conclui-se que a descentralização é dependente do contexto, sendo necessário equilibrar coordenação central e autonomia regional, com mecanismos que reduzam desigualdades e promovam maior coerência do sistema.

Palavras-chave: *Descentralização. Educação Superior. Governança. Financiamento. Equidade. Canadá. China.*

Educación Superior bajo una gestión descentralizada: contrastes y convergencias entre Canadá y China

Resumen

Este estudio analiza si los beneficios de la descentralización en la gobernanza de la educación superior pueden ser evidenciados empíricamente mediante una comparación entre Canadá y China. Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo exploratorio, con un diseño de estudio de casos múltiples. Los datos se recopilaron a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas con representantes gubernamentales y cuestionarios abiertos aplicados a especialistas y líderes estudiantiles. El análisis se realizó mediante análisis de contenido categorial, guiado por las dimensiones de gobernanza, financiamiento y equidad. Los resultados muestran que la descentralización produce efectos distintos según el contexto institucional. En Canadá, se asocia con autonomía y flexibilidad, pero también con desafíos de coordinación y desigualdades regionales. En China, opera bajo fuerte coordinación central, favoreciendo la expansión, aunque con desafíos en términos de calidad y equidad. Se concluye que la descentralización es dependiente del contexto y requiere equilibrar la coordinación central y la autonomía regional, junto con mecanismos que reduzcan desigualdades y mejoren la coherencia del sistema.

Palabras clave: *Descentralización. Educación Superior. Gobernanza. Financiamiento. Equidad. Canadá. China.*

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