

Review of the doctoral dissertation

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“Youth Policy in the Digital Era: From Policy Frameworks to Practice in Chinese Higher Education”

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I. Introductory remarks and legal basis

This review has been prepared on the basis of the Act of 20 July 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1571, as amended), in particular Article 187, under which a doctoral dissertation should demonstrate the candidate’s general theoretical knowledge in the discipline and the ability to conduct scholarly work independently, while its subject should be an original solution to a scholarly problem. The reviewer was appointed by the Council of the Discipline of Political Science and Administration of the University of Gdańsk, pursuant to Resolution No. 33/RDN/2026 dated 15 June 2026.

From these provisions follow three basic criteria that frame the assessment of the submitted dissertation: first, whether the work constitutes an original solution to a scholarly problem; second, whether it demonstrates the candidate’s general theoretical knowledge in the discipline; and third, whether it evidences the ability to conduct scholarly work independently. The present review is organised around these criteria. I state at the outset that, in my assessment, the dissertation satisfies all three. The reservations formulated below are of unequal weight: some are of a scholarly nature, while others concern the presentation of the empirical results and the source apparatus. I note them primarily for preparing the work for publication. The dissertation is the product of evident research maturity, and its strengths, discussed in detail below, clearly predominate.

II. Subject of the dissertation and its scholarly significance

The dissertation addresses the implementation of youth policy in the digital era, taking as its empirical centre of gravity the translation of policy frameworks into everyday organisational practice within Chinese higher education. This is a problem of considerable cognitive significance, clearly embedded in current debates within the discipline of political science and administration, as well as in the study of public governance and policy implementation. The

Author rightly observes that while scholarship on youth policy has extensively examined frameworks at the international and national levels, comparatively little attention has been paid to how such policies operate in concrete organisational settings and how they are received by young people themselves, particularly in digitally mediated environments.

The principal merit of the dissertation lies precisely in the way it defines this gap and sets out to bridge it. The Author connects the macro-level of policy design with the micro-level of student experience, treating young people not as passive recipients but as interpretive actors whose behaviour co-determines implementation outcomes. Such research orientation is both timely and original. It addresses a genuine gap in the literature and offers a perspective that is rarely pursued systematically. In this sense, the dissertation fills a discernible research gap and makes a recognisable contribution to scholarly debate, both within Polish political science, where the Chinese youth-governance system remains under-studied, and within the broader international discussion on digital governance.

It also deserves emphasis that the choice of the Chinese case is not merely illustrative. China has developed a distinctive youth-policy architecture, combining centralised steering with multi-level institutional implementation, and the dissertation succeeds in conveying the specificity of this arrangement rather than assimilating it to familiar Western models. The reviewer regards the selection and framing of the subject as fully justified, both in terms of its topicality and of its theoretical and empirical significance.

The dissertation is, moreover, genuinely interdisciplinary: it brings together public-policy analysis, the sociology of organisations, and the study of digital governance, and sustains a dialogue between Chinese-language scholarship and the Western theoretical canon that remains rare in Polish political science. This breadth is a real strength and gives the work a distinctive comparative value.

III. Objectives, research problem and hypotheses

The introduction is, overall, complete and contains the elements proper to this part of a dissertation: the research subject, the research gap, the central objective, five research questions, two hypotheses, the analytical framework, the research methods, and an overview of the structure. The central objective is formulated as an attempt to “explain how youth policy is implemented in the digital era through the interaction of institutional arrangements and student-level behaviors” (p. 6), which corresponds closely to the title and establishes a clear principal axis for the argument. The five research questions (pp. 28–30) are well-constructed and follow a coherent progression from the global context, through the national Chinese system and the

university's organisational level, to students' reception of policy and the operation of feedback mechanisms.

A few observations may be offered. First, there is a certain asymmetry between the five research questions and the two hypotheses (pp. 30–31): the hypotheses pertain essentially to the micro level (questions four and five), while the first three questions remain descriptive in character. This is a defensible design decision. Every question in a multi-level study does not have to be cast as a hypothesis, but it would be worth making the distinction explicit, so that the reader understands which parts of the dissertation are explanatory and which are reconstructive.

Second, and more substantively, the hypotheses are not operationalised, and they are not subsequently verified in an explicit empirical form. Both H1 (“Institutional arrangements and digital communication structures significantly influence how students receive and interpret youth policy information”) and H2 (“Student agency and peer network interactions mediate the outcomes of youth policy implementation within universities”) are formulated without specifying the variables, indicators, or in the case of H1 the statistical model on the basis of which a “significant” influence could be shown; H2 posits a mediation relationship without identifying the procedure by which the indirect effect would be tested. As a result, the dissertation develops an interpretive argument consistent with the hypotheses but does not provide an explicit empirical verification of them. Chapter 4 contains no formal mediation analysis for H2, and the section headed “Assessment of Research Hypotheses (H1–H2)” (pp. 275–276) restates the two hypotheses discursively rather than testing them. This reservation concerns the empirical-analytical layer of the design and should be addressed before publication. Finally, a minor inconsistency may be noted in the wording of the fourth research question, which speaks of students who “receive, interpret, and respond to” policy information in the abstract (p. 6) but only of “receive and interpret” in the introduction (p. 29); such details are easily harmonised.

IV. Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation of the dissertation rests on New Institutionalism, supplemented by social-investment theory, the rights-based approach to youth, and the literature on globalization and structural adjustment (Chapter 1). The choice of New Institutionalism as the leading framework is well motivated, and the Author explicitly subordinates the remaining perspectives to it as complementary analytical lenses (pp. 60, 77). The distinction between regulative, normative and cognitive elements (p. 34) is applied as an organising grid across the institutional- and student-level analyses, lending the dissertation conceptual unity.

It also deserves emphasis that the very attempt to integrate several theoretical registers around a single institutionalist core is intellectually ambitious and reflects the breadth of the Author's theoretical erudition.

The literature review is broad and demonstrates considerable reading; however, several theoretical categories and levels of analysis are not consistently distinguished. New Institutionalism is presented at once as the theoretical framework and as the "methodological underpinning" of the analysis (p. 34; in similar terms on pp. 60 and 73), although it is an analytical-theoretical perspective rather than a method. The rights-based approach is labelled a "youth policy theory perspective" (p. 63), whereas the text in fact develops a normative, human-rights framework, and "structural adjustment and globalisation" is treated as a single theory (pp. 66–72) although the Author's own account resolves it into three distinct bodies of theory. The three strands of New Institutionalism are correctly characterised (pp. 75–77), but their integration into a single operational model is asserted rather than demonstrated. A comparable imprecision affects the vocabulary of youth categories, where "adolescence", "youth" and "early adulthood" are used interchangeably (pp. 44–45) despite denoting different stages and categories.

At the same time, the theoretical layer functions primarily as conceptual framework and an ordering device and is to a lesser degree mobilised as a tool for directly explaining the processes analysed in the empirical chapters. Concepts such as the logic of appropriateness and path dependence are introduced in the methodological discussion (p. 34) but do not return with comparable intensity as analytical instruments in Chapter 4. The published version would gain clarity from a sharper separation of the theoretical and methodological roles of New Institutionalism and from a more explicit account of how the several perspectives combine into a single framework. These observations concern the fuller exploitation of the work's theoretical potential; they do not call into question the appropriateness of the framework to the problem undertaken.

V. Methodology and research approach

The dissertation adopts a multi-level research design that combines literature analysis, institutional analysis, a case study of Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics (ZUA), and survey-based empirical investigation of student experience (pp. 33–36). The instrumentarium is, on the whole, well chosen: the analysis of youth policy implementation calls above all for an in-depth interpretation of institutional arrangements, strategic documents, and communication practices, and qualitative institutional analysis is the appropriate route. Chapter 3 offers a detailed reconstruction of ZUA's formal organisational structure and of its asserted digital practices.

However, the empirical status and documentary basis of a number of highly specific mechanisms require clarification. The chapter reports, without sources, a “Policy Fast-Track” that decomposes central documents into a 36-item task list within 24 hours (p. 199), a quarterly joint meeting convening fifteen functional offices (p. 199), a “1+8+X” digital ecosystem (p. 209), an accountability layer “borrowing from blockchain concepts” (p. 214), and a natural-language-processing early-warning system that scans forums and group discussions for expressions of discontent (pp. 213–214). Because the chapter does not describe how these practices were established – the materials consulted, and whether interviews or observation were conducted, are not stated – these mechanisms stand as reconstruction rather than as documented findings, and in these cases the study lacks an explicit methodological account of its data base.

The quantitative component, in turn, is not presented in a form that permits independent assessment. The design is described as “mixed-method”, yet no integration procedure or design typology is specified, and in practice the study is predominantly qualitative and interpretive. Although the survey is said to have yielded “757 valid responses” collected “over a five-day window in May 2023” (p. 36), the dissertation reports no descriptive results, item-level distributions, scale properties, reliability measures, model estimates, significance levels or effect sizes. The text also refers to “two survey-based research designs” (p. 36) while describing a single data collection and a single figure showing valid responses. It would be necessary to clarify the sampling logic and the relationship between the survey population – Chinese college students reached through WeChat groups and peer dissemination – and the single-institution case study of ZUA, since the inferential link between the case and the student-level findings depends on it; and a brief account of research ethics (informed consent, anonymisation, data protection) would be expected.

Two further remarks concern the declared methods. The methodological description is broader than the methods demonstrably implemented in the dissertation. The “institutional legal methods” component (p. 35) is named but not carried out as a doctrinal-normative analysis, and could be either genuinely developed or absorbed into the institutional analysis; the “qualitative interpretation” invoked in the design is not tied to a described body of material or a stated procedure; and the empirical verification of the hypotheses announced in the design is not delivered in Chapter 4. The section on limitations (p. 279), which candidly acknowledges the single-case design and the national specificity of the findings, could usefully be extended to the features of the survey noted above. The successive chapters maintain a consistent conceptual vocabulary, although the evidentiary basis and the integration of the declared methods remain

uneven; aligning declaration with demonstration is the principal methodological task for the published version.

VI. Structure of the dissertation and the logic of the argument

The dissertation, in 318 pages, comprises a bilingual abstract (in English and Polish), an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and an extensive list of references. The bilingual abstract is consistent with the requirements of the Polish procedure. The structure is logical and transparent: Chapter 1 reconstructs global perspectives on youth policy in the digital era and lays the conceptual foundations; Chapter 2 traces the evolution and institutional characteristics of youth policy in China; Chapter 3 presents the case study of ZUA, with particular attention to digital platforms in policy communication; and Chapter 4 examines the student experience of youth policy, organised through the regulative–normative–cognitive grid. The overall sequence is clear. It may be noted, however, that Section 3.4 and parts of Chapter 4 move from university youth-policy implementation toward international-news overload and misinformation- and rumour-related behaviour (Sections 3.4.2–3.4.3). The connection between these fields and the reception of youth policy at ZUA would benefit from stronger justification.

Considered chapter by chapter, the construction reveals a deliberate analytical descent. The first chapter situates youth policy within the social-investment paradigm and the rights-based approach and reconstructs the historical evolution of the field from the post-war period to the digital era, supplying the conceptual vocabulary on which the later analysis draws. The second chapter is among the most informative parts of the work for a Polish or Western reader, since it reconstructs the periodisation of Chinese youth policy and the institutional roles of the leading actors (most notably the Communist Youth League) with a clarity not easily found in the existing literature. The third chapter, devoted to Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics, is where the dissertation makes its most distinctive contribution, mapping the party-led steering architecture, the administrative deployment of policy, and the layered landscape of digital platforms through which communication and monitoring are formally intended to occur, as represented in institutional materials and in the Author's reconstruction. The fourth chapter turns to the students themselves, deploying the regulative/normative/cognitive grid to interpret reception, selective compliance, peer mediation and feedback.

The reconstruction of the party-led steering chain in Chapter 3, extending from the Party Leadership Group of the Ministry of Education down to the branch level, is carried out with an organisational granularity and clarity rarely accessible to an external observer, and constitutes one of the dissertation's genuine strengths.

It is worth adding that the analytical grid is applied consistently down to the level of individual behaviour. In the fourth chapter the Author distinguishes, for instance, between formal compliance and routine completion on the one hand and genuine engagement on the other, and develops a plausible interpretive account of peer networks as informal mediators that may either reinforce or quietly reinterpret institutional messages. This is a subtle and persuasive proposition; however, it is not supported by separately presented survey results, cohort comparisons, or a formal mediation analysis and is therefore best read as an interpretive account inviting further empirical corroboration.

From the perspective of the work's design, one may note a certain imbalance between the contextual and strictly analytical layers. The two opening chapters, devoted to the global and the national context (pp. 43–179), together occupy markedly more space than the chapters that constitute the empirical core: the case study and the student-level analysis (pp. 180–270). The contextual chapters are valuable and competently written, but in the published version, it would be worth foregrounding the original case-based and micro-level findings more strongly, if necessary, at the expense of the broader background. A related observation concerns the introduction (pp. 15–42), which is comparatively extensive and incorporates an “Overview of Findings” and a discussion of research contributions that partly anticipate the conclusion; consolidating these elements would sharpen the composition.

VII. Source base and literature

The source base is extensive and includes valuable primary materials. The Author has carried out a broad bibliographic search – the list of references comprises several hundred items – and draws extensively on English-language scholarship, which for a study at the intersection of global governance and the Chinese system is not only justified but necessary. Value attaches to the use of primary materials (policy documents, institutional regulations and platform practices) rather than reliance on secondary analyses alone.

Particular recognition is due to the extensive use of Chinese-language primary sources (central and provincial policy documents, Communist Youth League materials, and CNKI scholarship) which gives the study direct access to an evidentiary base largely unavailable to Western researchers and is one of its most valuable assets.

Its reliability is nevertheless uneven, and this is a substantive rather than a merely editorial matter. In a number of places the reference attached to a claim does not fully support it: a study of the Moodle learning-management system is cited for the thesis that universities are central arenas of youth-policy implementation (p. 25, n. 42); a study of meaning in life among adolescents in Singapore and Israel is cited for the description of higher-education

governance (p. 25, n. 43); March and Olsen's article on New Institutionalism is cited for the history of post-war youth education and employment policy (p. 88, n. 204); and the European Skills Agenda is cited in the characterisation of the Asian regional policy architecture (p. 96, n. 233). One footnote merges two different publications of different authors, years and subjects (p. 138, n. 342). A series of very precise, multi-decimal figures cannot be reconstructed from the sources cited – for example, 476.34 million Communist Youth League members in the late 1970s (p. 116), a figure that is both implausible and internally inconsistent with the stated 28% share. Two further mismatches may be noted: a footnote on vocational employment services is attached to statements about the Law on the Protection of Minors (p. 141, n. 348); and data attributed to a 2023 report on the online protection of minors are in fact sourced to a 2009–2010 publication (p. 178, n. 416).

Distinct from these substantive matters, the scholarly apparatus also calls for editorial standardisation before publication: the dissertation employs two parallel citation systems – author–date footnotes alongside a numbered reference list, which should be unified. The reference list contains incomplete or inconsistently formatted entries (missing volume numbers or page ranges, and the use of “et al.” in full bibliographic descriptions); and it would be worth verifying that all listed items are in fact cited in the text.

VIII. General and detailed remarks

It is worth noting that the Author does not stop at presenting facts and views; rather, they consistently pursue research, drawing on the theoretical resources of the discipline to identify relationships and formulate conclusions. The Author generally seeks to maintain an analytical tone; however, a number of assessments are more categorical than the material warrants and would require stronger empirical support or more cautious wording. Thus, the statement that rural youth receive digital services “of the same quality” as urban youth (p. 168) is qualified by the subsequent account of a persistent infrastructural and digital-literacy gap (pp. 175–177), and causal formulations (“influence”, “strengthens”, “mediate”) are applied to what is, in design, an observational study. Some passages, moreover, reproduce official normative and evaluative language (“correct worldviews” (p. 57), “institutional advantages”, “significant incentive effects”) without sufficiently distinguishing institutional self-description from independent scholarly assessment. A brief reflexive note on the Author's own position in relation to the institution studied would strengthen the credibility of the case analysis.

The practical relevance of the work also deserves emphasis. By tracing how policy communication is received and filtered within a digitally saturated university environment, the dissertation yields conclusions of direct use to those responsible for institutional

communication: that the effectiveness of a policy message depends not only on its content but also on the architecture of the channels through which it travels, and that information overload and attention management have become constitutive conditions of implementation rather than incidental obstacles. Observations of this kind mark the Author as a researcher capable of drawing potentially transferable insight from material.

Among the more specific points, the relationship between the broad title and the operationalised scope is worth refining: while the work is announced as a study of “youth policy” in its full breadth, the empirical analysis concentrates on the communicative and participatory dimension of policy within a single university, which is a legitimate focus but could be signalled more precisely. The reviewer also notes the analytical promise of the feedback mechanisms discussed in Chapter 4, which point to a fruitful direction for further research – in particular, the conditions under which student feedback is translated into institutional adjustment would merit closer, comparative investigation.

IX. Language and editorial quality

The dissertation is generally intelligible, clear and readable, an asset given the complexity of the subject and the fact that it was prepared in the Author’s second language. It requires, however, comprehensive professional language and editorial revision before publication, for the linguistic problems are recurrent rather than isolated. They include grammatically incomplete or malformed sentences – for instance the sentence introducing the legal-methods component, “This dissertation systematically reconstructing and interpreting the relevant normative framework...” (p. 35); the automatic rendering of the character “+” as the word “add” (e.g. pp. 126, 143–144); and the diagram labelled “Figure 1. Research Framework” (p. 32), which appears to be an insufficiently verified AI-generated image containing non-words such as “practicartce”, “sccy”, “prodicets” and “scelable”. Several of these features are characteristic of insufficiently revised translation. The Polish abstract, in particular, would benefit from careful proofreading, as it contains calques from English that read unidiomatically in Polish — for instance, “gdy mniej ustrukturyzowane informacje mogą otrzymywać ograniczoną uwagę”. Tightening the pervasive repetition and replacing recurrent scaffolding phrasing with individualised synthesis would, in addition, noticeably raise the quality of the text.

X. Concluding remarks and overall assessment

The dissertation submitted for review is an ambitious and potentially valuable scholarly study that addresses a significant and topical research problem within the disciplines of political science and administration. Its principal strengths are clear: an original research orientation that

connects the macro level of policy frameworks with the micro level of student experience; a coherent multi-level analytical framework grounded in New Institutionalism; a detailed case description of a Chinese university drawing partly on primary institutional materials; and a sustained, disciplined line of argument. The Author demonstrates broad theoretical knowledge, good orientation in the state of research, and the ability to integrate diverse material into a single, purposeful analysis.

The remarks made in this review are of two kinds. Some concern the composition's proportions, the anchoring of the work in the comparative literature, and a range of editorial matters; others more substantive in character relate to the empirical verification of the hypotheses, the presentation of the survey data, and the source apparatus. All of them can be addressed in the course of preparing the dissertation for publication; none is of a disqualifying nature, and taken together they do not, in the reviewer's overall judgement, negate the originality of the research orientation, the soundness of the theoretical framework, or the candidate's demonstrated capacity for independent scholarly work. I would also encourage the Author to pursue publication of the dissertation's findings, which, once revised along the lines indicated above, could make a valuable contribution to the international literature on youth policy and digital governance.

In conclusion, the submitted dissertation constitutes an original solution to a significant scholarly problem, and within it, the Candidate has demonstrated broad theoretical knowledge in the discipline of political science and administration as well as the ability to conduct scholarly work independently. I therefore assess the doctoral dissertation by M.A. Zhiyin Guo positively. I state that it meets the statutory requirements set for doctoral dissertations, and that M.A. Zhiyin Guo should be admitted to the further stages of the doctoral procedure.