

Review of the doctoral dissertation: *Youth Policy in the Digital Era: From Policy Frameworks to Practice in Chinese Higher Education*

Gdańsk 2026, pp. 340 (incl. Appendix)

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The review was prepared pursuant to Resolution No. 34/RDN/2026 of the Discipline Council (Political Science and Administration) of the University of Gdańsk, adopted on June 15, 2026.

The subject of this review is the doctoral dissertation entitled *Youth Policy in the Digital Era: From Policy Frameworks to Practice in Chinese Higher Education*, which examines the implementation of youth policy under conditions of digitally mediated governance, with particular emphasis on Chinese higher education institutions. The topic of the dissertation falls within the scope of political science and public administration, at the intersection of youth policy, public governance, higher education, and digital institutional communication.

The dissertation is structured around a multi-level research logic. The doctoral candidate moves from the global and theoretical frameworks of youth policy (Chapter 1), through an analysis of the development and specific features of the Chinese youth policy system (Chapter 2), to a case study of Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics (Chapter 3), and finally to an analysis of students' experiences related to the reception, interpretation, and processing of information in the digital environment, based on a survey study (N = 757) (Chapter 4 and the Appendix). This structure is ambitious and reflects the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation, although, as demonstrated below, not all parts of the dissertation have been developed with the same degree of precision.

Theoretical Foundations and Disciplinary Knowledge

Theoretically, the dissertation is ambitious and wide-ranging. As its leading framework, the Doctoral Candidate declares new institutionalism – in its three variants: rational-choice, historical, and sociological – supplemented by complementary perspectives: social investment

theory, the concept of youth as rights-bearers, the perspective of structural adjustment and globalization, as well as digital governance, policy communication, and research on participation and student experience. Already in Chapter 1, youth policy is aptly framed as a cross-sectoral field of public intervention (education, employment, health, social inclusion, civic participation), which allows youth policy to be treated as a distinct area of public policy and public administration. Credit is due for the consistent linking of new-institutionalist categories – strategic actor interaction, path dependency, institutional norms, legitimation, cultural-cognitive frames – to the analysis of both the macro-structures of youth policy and the micro-mechanisms of its reception by students; in Chapter 3 these categories serve to interpret the university's dual party-administrative structure. Chapter 1, which reviews four theoretical frameworks, constitutes a solid, though at times overly descriptive, literature review, closed by a valuable synthesis.

A weakness of the theoretical foundations lies in their excessive breadth and, at times, declarative character: the dissertation invokes many perspectives without always clearly indicating which constitutes the main framework, which is auxiliary, and which is merely contextual background, while numerous general categories (global youth policy, regional architectures, digital era, social investment, rights-based approach, structural adjustment, globalization) are not always translated into operational categories of analysis used in the empirical study. This applies in particular to the very concept of global youth policy – the work rightly documents the existence of international agendas and regional architectures, but at times suggests the existence of a single, unified global youth policy; it would be more precise to consistently use the concepts of transnational discourses, international frameworks, and shared policy priorities.

New institutionalism, although declared as the leading framework, is not always fully operationalized – there is a lack of consistent specification of which rules, norms, cultural-cognitive frames, and path-dependency mechanisms are being analyzed at each level of the study, with the result that the theory sometimes functions more as an interpretive language than as a coherent research matrix; a symptom of this is the formulaic, repeatedly recurring phrase concluding successive subsections (“from the perspective of new institutionalism...”). Added to this are specific shortcomings: an extended neurobiological-psychological digression (pp. 44-47) loosely connected to the subject of the dissertation; the uncritical introduction of the classical world-systems theory formulated in the 1970s (pp. 70–71), without addressing the fact that its assumptions about the structural dependency of peripheral countries are difficult to reconcile with the position of China – described in later chapters – as a centralized, strongly interventionist state of growing global standing; and the historical periodization of youth policy presented as “global” (pp. 87-94), which, in its account of the first two stages, is based directly on sources concerning European history and is not connected to the separate Chinese periodization introduced in Chapter 2 (pp. 114-153).

The operationalization of the youth-as-rights-bearers perspective adopted by the Author deserves separate comment. In the definition of youth policy cited (p. 51), the Doctoral Candidate lists “civic participation” as one of five constitutive dimensions of the concept, and describes the rights-based approach as emphasizing “meaningful involvement of young people

in shaping decisions that affect them” (p. 49). In the description of youth-policy governance, however – both at the national level (Chapter 2) and the institutional level (Chapter 3, the “Party-led steering → administrative deployment → college-level implementation” architecture, pp. 194–199) – this dimension is practically absent: the only upward flow described is feedback serving oversight, rather than young people’s co-determination of policy content.

In my assessment, Zhiyin Guo, M.A. demonstrates broad and in-depth theoretical knowledge in the discipline of political science and public administration. However, the theoretical foundations require a greater degree of selection, prioritisation, and operationalisation. They are most convincing where they are linked to specific mechanisms, such as digital information overload, selective congruence, the role of peer networks, and the distinction between the formal completion of a task and the actual interpretation of a message – that is, where the analytical categories developed in Chapter 4 anchor the theoretical framework in the empirical material.

Independence in conducting scientific work

The dissertation demonstrates the Doctoral Candidate’s independence in formulating the research problem and constructing a multi-level research design. The very decision to bring together youth policy, Chinese higher education, digital governance, and student experience attests to an independent research conception, which is reflected in the five research questions (RQ1–RQ5) precisely defined in the Introduction, proceeding from the global level (RQ1), through the national and institutional level (RQ2, RQ3), down to the micro, student level (RQ4, RQ5). This logically ordered set of questions faithfully reflects the adopted macro–meso–micro architecture and testifies to the maturity of the Author’s research workshop.

The dissertation puts forward two hypotheses (H1, H2), corresponding to the micro-level RQ4 and RQ5, which are examined quantitatively by means of a survey and statistical analysis – while the descriptive-exploratory RQ1–RQ3 remain, in keeping with mixed-methods convention, without their own hypotheses; this difference in approach would nonetheless be worth explaining explicitly already in the Introduction. A more serious shortcoming is a terminological error in the formulation of H2, repeated in the Conclusion: the hypothesis speaks of mediation (“student agency and peer network interactions mediate the outcomes...”), whereas the method applied in the Appendix – hierarchical regression with interaction terms – in fact tests moderation, which requires correction.

The independence of the work is also evidenced by the fully independently collected and processed empirical material presented in the Appendix: the study encompassed 757 respondents, and the Doctoral Candidate applied CFA with reporting of AVE and CR, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, path analysis, and hierarchical regression with VIF diagnostics – this is unquestionably the methodologically most rigorous part of the dissertation. The choice of Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics as the sole university covered by the case study is justified as a “paradigmatic” case, representative of the majority of Chinese public universities – provincial, industry-oriented, non-elite (p. 180); a reservation arises, however, from the

declarative character of this justification, which is not supported by any comparative data on the typology of Chinese higher education.

At the same time, the analytical independence of the work is uneven. In Chapters 1 and 2, the text often stays close to official narratives and textbook-style accounts – Chapter 2 in particular reconstructs Chinese youth policy in functional and developmental language, analyzing tensions, power asymmetries, or the ambivalence between youth development and institutional control less often. A similar problem appears in Chapter 3, where the detailed cataloguing of the university's organizational units does not always progress into an analysis of operating mechanisms – independent interpretation emerges more strongly where dual-role governance, digital workflows, monitoring, or the role of peer networks are discussed.

The greatest intellectual independence is revealed in Chapter 4, where the Author most fully develops her own analytical categories and interprets the tension between the digital availability of information and its actual uptake – although the strength of this chapter is partly limited by the absence of any reference to the top-down information-relay mechanism established in Chapter 3 when justifying the questionnaire used in the Appendix, which measures, to a significant extent, general reactions to public events; the very status of the empirical material used in this chapter also requires clarification: subsection 4.3.2 (p. 245) refers explicitly to empirical patterns described as coming from the “author's published paper” – an earlier, co-authored publication by Zhiyin Guo, M.A. (Guo, Liu, Gao, Adams, Kalinowska-Żeleźnik, 2024), which concerns Chinese students' reactions to social-media communications about international events rather than youth policy – which further explains why the questionnaire used in the Appendix measures reactions to “general public events”. The dissertation, moreover, contains no declaration of the Doctoral Candidate's individual contribution to this earlier publication – both the scope of that contribution and the justification for transferring to Chapter 4 empirical patterns from a study with a different subject matter require unambiguous clarification by the Author during the defense.

Originality of the solution to the scientific problem

The dissertation provides an original solution to a research problem within the meaning of Article 187(2) of the Act. Its main contribution lies in Chapter 4 and the Appendix, which develop several valuable and partly original analytical concepts, including “bounded responsiveness”, the distinction between “formal compliance” and “substantive uptake”, and the “translation gap” between students' experiences and administrative categories. Taken together, these concepts constitute a meaningful theoretical contribution to the study of public policy implementation in digitally mediated environment. It is a pity that these concepts were not explicitly named and highlighted in the Conclusion as the main scholarly contribution of the work. Chapter 2 also has documentary value – though not fully original from a cognitive standpoint – in that it assembles a rich body of institutional material on the Chinese youth-policy system.

The assessment of originality is nonetheless weakened by four circumstances. First, the narrow empirical base – a single university – limits the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn from the dissertation's empirical material; the Author does justify the choice of ZUA as a

“paradigmatic” case, representative of the structural characteristics of the majority of Chinese public universities (p. 180), but this claim is declarative in character and is not supported by any comparative data on the typology of Chinese higher education, which still limits the validity of the generalizations drawn from it.

Second, the questionnaire used in the Appendix measures, to a significant extent, students’ general reactions to the digital circulation of information about major public events, rather than directly the reception of the university’s youth-policy communications. Chapter 3 does establish that ZUA – like most Chinese public universities – does not create youth policy autonomously but functions as a node in the top-down architecture of its transmission (Party-led steering, administrative deployment, college-level implementation, pp. 194-199), encompassing, among other things, the Policy Fast-Track and the dissemination of “policy explainers” by the Publicity Department via WeChat, which makes the analogy between the reception of general official information and the reception of youth-policy communications theoretically sound – Chapter 4, however, does not explicitly draw on this previously established mechanism, which constitutes a gap in the integration between chapters rather than a lack of grounding in the dissertation itself.

Third, the repetitions of identical numerical values across different, unrelated phenomena noted in Chapter 2, together with the arithmetical error concerning the membership figures of the Communist Youth League, undermine the reliability of part of the documentary material on which the originality of this chapter’s findings rests (see: Detailed comments).

Fourth, the standardized factor loading of 0.999 for the reference item of one of the factors in the CFA model (Table 2 of the Appendix) is empirically atypical and may indicate a so-called Heywood case, which – if confirmed – would bear on the reliability of the quantitative results that constitute the vehicle of Chapter Four’s originality; this matter requires clarification by the Doctoral Candidate during the defense.

Detailed comments

The doctoral dissertation runs to approximately 340 pages of main text (together with an extensive Appendix) and forms a logical, though not fully internally consistent, whole, composed of an Introduction, four chapters, and a Conclusion. In the Introduction, the Doctoral Candidate clearly presents the research problem and its placement within the relevant literature. A reservation arises, however, from the premature and fairly detailed reporting of the study’s findings and conclusions already in the Introduction (the “Overview of Findings” and “Research Contributions” subsections, pp. 36-41) – this function properly belongs to the Conclusion, and its duplication in both places constitutes unnecessary redundancy. Nor does the Introduction contain a definition of “youth”, a concept central to the entire work, merely declaring the “uniform” adoption of the UN definition (ages 15-24, p. 43), whereas Chapter Two adopts a separate Chinese definition (ages 14-35, p. 111) – this internal contradiction is nowhere explained or even flagged in the dissertation.

Beyond the shortcomings of Chapter 1 already discussed above in connection with the assessment of the theoretical foundations, it is worth adding that the extensive evaluative

framework proposed in subsection 1.7 (pp. 103–108) was not explicitly linked to the empirical design actually applied in Chapters 3–4, which weakens its function within the structure of the work.

Chapter 2 contains rich institutional documentation but reveals the most serious substantive concerns of the entire dissertation. In several places, exactly the same, highly precise numerical values recur as the result of different, unrelated phenomena – for example, “2.346 million” appears both as the number of beneficiaries of housing subsidies (p. 146) and as the number of employees of the urban-governance grid (p. 149), while “8,760” appears as the number of enterprises with youth-entrepreneurship funds and, on the same page, as the number of service projects purchased (p. 152). More serious is an arithmetical error: the stated number of Communist Youth League members in the late 1970s (476.34 million, i.e., 28% of all youth, pp. 116–117) is impossible given China’s total population at the time (under one billion), which suggests an order-of-magnitude error requiring unconditional correction and source verification of the entire set of statistical data in this chapter. The chapter also contains a sentence repeated verbatim at the opening of subsection 2.5 (pp. 171–172) and a word broken across the page boundary between pp. 173–174.

Chapter 3, presented as a “case study”, is to a large extent focused on describing the university’s organizational structure (partly based on its promotional materials); the most valuable part of this description – numerous detailed operational facts concerning policy-implementation mechanisms (among others, the “1+8+X” digital architecture, the Policy Fast-Track system, and an early-warning system based on natural language processing that scans student forums for “words of discontent” pp. 199, 209, 214) – is nonetheless presented without any source citation, which raises a legitimate question about the origin of this knowledge and about the study’s reproducibility. Also worth noting is a lack of analytical consistency: the critical reflection on the risks of digital surveillance and power asymmetry that the Doctoral Candidate aptly develops in Chapter 1 (pp. 101–102) is not applied to the student-sentiment monitoring system described in Chapter 3, which is discussed in an entirely neutral manner.

In Chapter 4, beyond the original analytical categories already noted, the interpretation of one politically significant finding remains underdeveloped: the negative, statistically significant relationship between trust in official government channels (“Rumor Governance”) and students’ social-media participation (Table 9 of the Appendix) – a result that would deserve separate comment in light of the critical theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1.

The Conclusion answers the research questions systematically, but in an overly generic manner, without invoking any specific quantitative result from Chapter 4 or empirical detail from Chapter 3, and the “Research Contributions” section largely duplicates the content of the analogous section already included in the Introduction. The limitations section (p. 279) is, moreover, generic in character (single case study, single-country focus, need for comparative research) and does not list the actual limitations specific to this dissertation, such as the status of the empirical material drawn from a co-authored publication, the convenience-sampling method used (WeChat), or the three-year gap between data collection (May 2023) and the anticipated defense.

Editorial remarks include: an unclear, likely erroneously worded phrase, “During important youth policy pup up just, social media becomes...” (Ch. 3, p. 219); footnote numbers run together without separation (Ch. 3, p. 181); inconsistent formatting of footnote numbering in some places in the work (e.g., footnote no. 46); a terminological inconsistency between “rights-bearers” (title of subsection 1.2.2) and the “rights holders” used consistently in the text; and at least one example of a footnote clearly mismatched to the content of the claim it supports – the statement about the emergence of an “integrated online and offline lifestyle” (Ch. 1, p. 52) is footnoted to an article on market concentration in academic publishing (Larivière, Haustein, Mongeon, 2015), which has no substantive connection to this claim.

Conclusion

In summary, the dissertation addresses a topic that is original, timely, and cognitively significant, bringing together the issues of youth policy, digital governance, and the experience of students at a Chinese university. Its greatest strength lies in its empirical part, particularly Chapter 4, which aptly demonstrates the difference between the technical delivery of information and its actual reception, interpretation, and translation into action.

The dissertation’s most important merits include: the topicality and significance of the subject matter, rarely addressed in this way within Polish academic scholarship; an ambitious, multi-level research architecture (macro–meso–micro); an apt recognition of the university as a site of youth-policy implementation, combining educational, welfare, mobilizing, and control functions; a competently conducted, fully independent quantitative component in Chapter 4, encompassing CFA, AVE/CR indices, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and hierarchical regression with VIF diagnostics; the original analytical categories proposed in that chapter; and, in places, a very mature critical reflection on the risks of digital surveillance and power asymmetry (subsections 1.6.2 and 2.5).

The dissertation’s main weaknesses include: problems with the integrity of statistical data in Chapter 2 (an arithmetical error concerning Communist Youth League membership figures, and recurring identical numerical values attached to different phenomena); the unexplained scope of the Doctoral Candidate’s individual contribution to the co-authored publication used as the empirical basis of Chapter 4; the unexploited link, in Chapter 4, between the top-down information-relay mechanism established in Chapter 3 and the thematic scope of the questionnaire used; conflicting definitions of youth age and unconnected historical periodizations in Chapters 1 and 2; the unverified suspicion of a Heywood case in the CFA model, together with the “mediation/moderation” terminological error in the formulation of Hypothesis H2; the discrepancy between the central role of civic participation in the adopted definition of youth policy and its absence from the empirical account of governance mechanisms in Chapters 2 and 3; as well as the empirically thin, citation-free case study in Chapter 3, and the inconsistent application of the Doctoral Candidate’s own critical theoretical framework regarding digital surveillance.

The above reservations, although significant, do not in my assessment negate the scientific and cognitive value of the dissertation, which remains an ambitious work, well-grounded theoretically, and methodologically sound in its fourth part.

I hereby declare that the doctoral dissertation entitled *Youth Policy in the Digital Era: From Policy Frameworks to Practice in Chinese Higher Education*, prepared by Zhiyin Guo, M.A., meets the statutory requirements set out in Article 187 of the Act of 20 July 2018 – the Law on Higher Education and Science (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1668). In my assessment, the dissertation demonstrates the Doctoral Candidate's general theoretical knowledge in the discipline, her ability to conduct independent scholarly research, and the originality of the proposed solution to the research problem. This warrants a positive conclusion, provided that the Doctoral Candidate addresses the reservations identified above during the public defense. I therefore recommend that Ms Zhiyin Guo, M.A., be admitted to the subsequent stages of the doctoral proceedings.

Bydgoszcz, July 28, 2026

Katarzyna Kopu