

Causes and Development Trends of Blind Review System of Thesis in Chinese Universities

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Abstract:

The blind review system of thesis has become an indispensable part of degree-awarding in most universities in China. Through analyses of its causes, strengths and weaknesses, it can be concluded that the blind review system can help avoid decisions made out of worldly relations and enhance motivations of students and supervisors in the thesis reviewing process, thus improving the quality of thesis.

Key Words: thesis; Chinese universities; society of worldly relations; blind review system

At present, the blind review system of thesis is a measure commonly taken by Chinese universities to improve the quality of thesis. The system, which learns from the blind-peer-review system of foreign countries, was initially implemented in a few universities and was gradually popularized afterwards. The blind review system of thesis, after continuous improvements in practices, has now become a relatively commonly-used system, demonstrating its active demand in China.^[1]Therefore, it is of great significance to analyze the causes of its emergence and to figure out the reasons why it is highly recognized by Chinese universities.

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1. What Is the Blind Review System of Thesis?

The blind review system of thesis is to send thesis to peer reviewers outside universities for further review, with its relevant information as to names of the author and supervisor, etc. concealed, so as to ensure the fairness and objectivity of the result. Prior to the appearance of blind review system, Chinese universities used to utilize the review system with all relevant information like names of the author and supervisors, etc. revealed; hence, there came the situation where people did not offend or went against each other on purpose in the reviewing process. Some postgraduates even played tricks to bribe reviewers instead of taking time to write theses dedicatedly.^[2]As a result, the blind review system of thesis has been gradually adopted by Chinese universities widely, with ever more stronger calls for improving the old reviewing system.

If a thesis does not pass the review, it should be further modified for re-examination; and the student cannot attend thesis defense and be rewarded degree afterwards until he passes the blind review. China's blind review system of thesis has continued to be developed, from the initial "Single-Blind Review" to "Double-Blind Review" and to the recent "Third Party Review", currently becoming an indispensable and essential part of degree-awarding for most Chinese universities.

2. Why Does the Blind Review System of Thesis Become Popularized in China?

The applicant should go through the whole process of thesis proposal, blind review, thesis defense, etc. before he is qualified for an official degree. In terms of design of the system, each part is aimed at monitoring student's thesis writing process. Theoretically, a thesis can be eliminated directly so long as the supervisor finds it unqualified; practically however, blind review remains to be the only relatively rigid standard of the whole process. In China's relationship-prominent social atmosphere, few theses shall be eliminated through thesis proposal, thesis defense and so forth. Some supervisors reveal that thesis defense of partial subjects in some universities is astoundingly perfunctory: more than 20 postgraduates are scheduled for thesis defense in merely half a day, with each one having no more than five minutes or even three minutes for presentation, enquiry and defense respectively. Such thesis defense degenerates into mere forms with no practical effect. Consequently, some supervisors do not recommend their junior postgraduates to observe the defense process for they might not have taken thesis-writing seriously after viewing such perfunctory procedure.^[3]Back in April, 2016, when a teacher was reviewing a doctoral dissertation spot checked by the Ministry of Education in Nanjing, he found that the dissertation had several serious problems but its author passed the whole procedure and was granted degree despite all these. It is, in effect, not easy to change the current situation although supervisors concerned find problems accordingly; because supervisors are burdened with the so called "Renqing"(worldly relations) in China's social atmosphere. To begin with, students with unqualified theses need to be given several

chances for revisions, which lead to prolonged working time for extra defense meetings. Furthermore, considerations need to be taken seriously on whether students can bear such failures or not which might have caused unexpected extreme cases. All in all, the blind review system remains to be the only appropriate step to conduct elimination of unqualified theses in practice. In China, an increasing number of universities expect to improve the quality of thesis (dissertation) by the application of blind review system and they regard it as a way to exclude students with unqualified these from graduation or degree-awarding, thus forcing students to take their theses (dissertation) seriously.

Generally speaking, there are three main reasons as to the popularization of the blind review system of thesis in China:

(1) It is due to the implementation and advocacy of the education administration department for postgraduates. Since the implementation of enrollment expansion of colleges in 1999, the scale of the postgraduate enrollment has continued to enlarge, with the number of postgraduates and doctoral candidates surging in accordance. In 2000, the number of students under postgraduates in China was 301,239; in 2017, the number amounted to 2,639,561.^[4] Therefore, it becomes an important subject regarding how to ensure the quality of talent cultivation in higher institutions. The emergence of the blind review system of thesis is one of the results from the educational administration exploration conducted by education authorities for postgraduates in China. The blind review system not only draws on advanced experiences overseas, but also makes institutional innovation in line with China's national conditions.

(2) It is due to the proactive response and support from postgraduate supervisors. Supervisors, as the most active supporter for the blind review system of thesis, are able to control students' thesis-writing process effectively with the existence of such system. First of all, supervisors can decide whether their students' theses qualified enough for blind review. Without consents from supervisors, theses cannot be sent for blind-peer review through education authorities for postgraduates. Besides, if a thesis is regarded unqualified after blind review, the supervisor concerned can block thesis from publication with proper excuses. As a result, the blind review system becomes an effective means for supervisors to improve the quality of their students' these.

(3) The blind review system helps to avoid decisions made out of worldly relations in the thesis reviewing process in Chinese universities. The traditional convention of emphasizing on "Guanxi" or "personal relationship", which came into being under the backdrop of China's long-lasting agricultural civilization, still plays its role in today's society. Under such circumstances, whoever disobeys traditional conventions will be recognized as deviant and hence will be burdened with huge pressures from public opinions. Not surprisingly, supervisors often fall into the dilemma of worldly relations during the degree-awarding process. The appearance of the blind review system of thesis manages to curb decisions made out of worldly

relations by means of institutions. Meanwhile, it addresses the dilemma between supervisors themselves and between supervisors and students. Reviewers can impartially turn down theses in poor qualities and supervisors can control the process by deciding whether to send theses for further blind review in the first place. In consequence, no one is at the mercy of the so called “Renqing”(worldly relations) for all work are played by rules.

3. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Blind Review System of Thesis

In accordance with practices of the system in recent years, strengths and weaknesses of the blind review system of thesis are as follows:

(1) It allows reviewers avoid restraints from worldly relations and make objective comments on these.

The blind review system helps reviewers avoid constraints from worldly relations and “Guanxi”, and make objective evaluations on theses independently, thus making results ever more genuine.

(2) It prevents from having things done by pulling some strings.

The blind review system, particularly the one conducted on the third party-basis, eradicates situations of pulling strings to have thesis passed. Blind review helps to cut connections between authors and reviewers and prevents from misbehaviors in the thesis reviewing process.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that the blind review system still owns some limitations to be overcome due to lack of experiences. From the current operation condition of this system, its main problems are as follows:

(1) Misjudgments can easily appear in blind review out of improper operation of the system.

The crucial part of the whole blind review procedures is to send theses to reviewers with matching specialties and research orientations, which is not easy with the continuously growing workloads in blind review. If reviewers concerned are not familiar with the research orientations of certain these, the results will undoubtedly be inaccurate with existence of errors and wrongs. In addition, as all information related to the author of the thesis should be concealed, reviewers can only make commentaries based on the thesis alone; however, evaluations made in blind review process are subjective to so degree, owing to limitations as to reviewers’ perspectives, habits and personal preferences, etc.

(2)The blind review system of thesis requires a more flexible degree-awarding system.

Blind review procedure is often carried out in March and lasts for about a month in Chinese universities. In May and June, the thesis blind review would often make the already busy period even busier for both students and supervisors. Suppose that a student does not pass the blind review of thesis, he should revise his thesis, re-send it for another review and wait for the result. In this case, he might not be able to attend thesis defense in time (normally in June)

and be rewarded degree thereafter. Therefore, the implementation of the blind review system of thesis requires universities to increase batches of degree-awarding a year, instead of merely once a year, thus allowing those who do not pass blind review to apply for thesis defense and be granted degree after a shorter period of time. Evidently, it proposes higher demands for administration departments of Chinese universities judging from the current situations in universities.

(3) Understandings of the thesis blind review requires to be further enhanced.

Currently, all universities in China have begun to realize the superiority of the blind review system and regard it as a crucial means to eliminate unqualified theses. Compared to the previous situation, it is certainly a progress made closer to the international standards. Nevertheless, more explorations can be made to play the roles of the blind review system to the maximum degree.

First of all, thesis blind review can be integrated with postgraduate education. Problems found in theses through blind review are problems existing in education process. Although students can graduate in procedure after the completion of blind review procedure, problems found in such processes are valuable for students under graduate. Universities can make corresponding adjustments of postgraduate education in accordance with problems emerged in blind review process.

Additionally, the blind review result can be integrated with the degree diagnostic assessment. The result of the blind review system of thesis is a favorable indicator for discipline evaluation. With the accumulation of relevant data concerning blind review system over the years, problems that exist in the degree construction and talent cultivation will show their appearances in the thesis blind review process.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the blind review system of thesis is relatively suitable for postgraduate education in China, although it still remains a few problems for further improvement given the current situation. From the perspective of the implementation of the system, it can be seen that “Renqing” (worldly relations) still stands as a core concept in Chinese culture and that people regard the dilemma of worldly relations as an unsolvable issue in the short run during the transitional period of China.^[6] However, such dilemma and decisions made out of the so called “Renqing” can be refrained thorough the continuous improvement of laws and institutions in modern society, which is also the fundamental reason why the blind review system of thesis can work effectively. The blind review system of thesis has gradually become popularized in Chinese universities and has developed into a routine procedure nowadays. In light of the current situation, this system is bound to be improving continuously in the future and plays a greater role in improving the quality of theses in Chinese universities.

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