



## Who influences higher education decision-making in Taiwan? An analysis of internal stakeholders

Sheng-Ju Chan & Chung Chou

To cite this article: Sheng-Ju Chan & Chung Chou (2020): Who influences higher education decision-making in Taiwan? An analysis of internal stakeholders, *Studies in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2020.1823646](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1823646)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1823646>



Published online: 13 Oct 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Who influences higher education decision-making in Taiwan? An analysis of internal stakeholders\*

Sheng-Ju Chan<sup>a</sup> and Chuing Chou<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Graduate Institute of Education, National Chung Cheng University, Chiayi County, Taiwan; <sup>b</sup>Department of Education, National Chengchi University, Taipei City, Taiwan

## ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, Taiwan has gone through a series of drastic higher education transformations in response to the multi-faceted demands from globalization and domestic social change. Among the driving forces, new public management and neoliberal ideology have reshaped the nature and culture of higher education in Taiwan. The current study focuses on the broader internal stakeholders' relationships to higher education policy as they systematically engage with governance through decision-making. We empirically explore who the main actors are that make decisions at the ministerial level. The study identifies six key groups with different characteristics and traits. Acting as coalitions, these groups frequently influence policy formulation. Moreover, their influential paths – identified as elite approach, professional engagement, and political networking – jointly steer higher education decision-making. These triangular paths serve as a valuable conceptual framework to understand the complicated influential paths from internal stakeholders who have affected Taiwan's higher education policy.

## KEYWORDS

Higher education governance; decision-making; internal stakeholder; advocacy coalition framework

## 1. Introduction

Globalization and the entrenchment of neo-liberal ideology have had a profound impact on higher education policy and governance, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region (Chou and Ching 2012). Many higher education institutions (HEIs) are geared toward pursuing internationalization to strengthen their global competitiveness and the achievement of world-class status, with the hope of increasing their international visibility and educational markets (Lo 2014; Mok 2014). In order to maintain university quality, the Taiwanese government not only strengthened its quality assurance system, but also shifted its higher education governance philosophy from 'government control' to 'government supervision' (Lo 2014). As the influence of globalization has reached higher education, Taiwanese universities have encountered increased pressure for global visibility and competitiveness, which in turn plays a crucial role in attracting international talent, research collaboration, and resources (Chou 2008; Shin 2013). In order to reform its higher education system, the Taiwanese government introduced different strategies for benchmarking its leading universities' research output with global standards (Chou, Lin, and Chiu 2013). Many of these new higher education policies ultimately changed the academic culture and norms in an unprecedented way (Chan and Yang 2018). Such new policies include the Top University Project in 2005 and the Teaching Excellence Project in 2006 (both were renewed in 2011). In addition, the Higher Education Sprout Project (HESP) was launched in 2017 with a NT\$86.85 billion (USD2.9 billion) investment.

**CONTACT** Chuing Chou  iaezcpc@gmail.com

\*This paper is dedicated to Dr. John N. Hawkins (1944-2020), a former professor at UCLA and life-long mentor to the authors.

© 2020 Society for Research into Higher Education

Despite these major higher education policies initiatives in Taiwan over the past 15 years, few studies have focused on how these policies were formulated due to the lack of robust data. The top political leaders and senior civil servants were undoubtedly deeply involved in the drafting of key policies; however, this article aims to explore how higher education policies are affected by internal stakeholders as they are systematically engaged with governance via decision-making. We empirically explore who the main internal stakeholders are that make major decisions in the ministries. Furthermore the study will examine what were influential paths that were utilized by these stakeholders so as to consolidate their power during the decision-making process. Our investigation into these questions aims to fill the knowledge gap about how higher education policies in Taiwan are formulated by the internal stakeholders.

## **2. Higher education governance, policy decision-making, and stakeholders**

Like many East Asian countries, Taiwan also has a very strong tradition in state-led policy-making. It is critical and essential to explore the more influential decision-makers during policy formulation. This study aims to understand such a dynamic relationship between the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other internal stakeholders. This section outlines the changing relationship among governance, policy decision-making, and stakeholders in their different coalitions.

### **2.1. Higher education governance in Taiwan and policy decision-making**

In recent decades, governance has been a hot issue as the government and the public are keen to pursue more effective, accountable, and transparent mechanisms for universities (Shin 2018). According to Burton Clark's model, three major forces shape the operation of the higher education sector: state authority, academic oligarchy, and the market (Brenna 2010). These interaction of these forces results in different types of governance models, including the bureaucratic, collegial, and corporate models (Braun and Merrien 1999; McNay 1999). Taiwanese higher education was characterized as a strong state-led governance model (Chan 2010), meaning that universities were seriously constrained by the laws, rules, and regulations imposed by the state authority. However, since the 1990s, greater autonomy and market forces seem to play a bigger role in the higher education sector. Although national universities were not corporatized, much freedom was granted to individual institutions. At the same time, greater market principles have been adopted to stimulate the operational effectiveness and efficiency at the institutional level. The Taiwanese government preferred to utilize competitive funding schemes to steer the development of universities from a distance. These extra funds, except for regular grants allocated to universities, were deployed in the form of market competition in achieving the prescribed governmental objectives. In other words, a mixed governance model is preferred by the Taiwanese government as it can achieve two macro ideals simultaneously, that is, institutional autonomy/freedom and national development.

As pointed out earlier, a mixed governance approach was adopted to regulate the behavior of universities in Taiwan (Chan and Yang 2018). Nevertheless, how is policy decision-making formed and formulated? And who are the main actors of this process? Previous literature has maintained that several forces shape higher education governance (Goedegebuure and de Boer 1996; Ness, Tandberg, and McLendon 2015). Inside the wider government, the MOE is responsible for policy-making, with significant amount of influence from the legislation sector, jurisdiction sector, and other horizontal ministries, such as labor, internal affairs, and sometimes finance ministries. Outside the government, higher education policies are may also be shaped by mass media, NGOs, educational associations, cultural communities, and even stakeholders. Therefore, a wide range of forces may shape the direction of policy decision-making in Taiwanese higher education, as outlined. According to Balbachevsky (2015), there are internal and external stakeholders in Brazilian higher education; the former denotes the academic profession (including professional oligarch, scientific community, unionized lectures, and private sector academics) and other internal stakeholders

(such as student movement and unions, employee unions and central administration). The current study is particularly interested in the broader internal stakeholders in relation to higher education policy-making at the ministerial level. We also aim to examine how their influences and powers affect decision-making based on a number of major policies or projects over the past 15 years. These investigations would bring a better understanding of how internal stakeholders help to govern the higher education sector through a participatory decision-making process (Goedegebuure and de Boer 1996).

## **2.2. Conceptual framework: stakeholders as a coalition**

As we have demonstrated, these internal stakeholders play a critical role in shaping the governance and policy process in collaboration with policy-makers at the MOE. Although not within the formal bureaucratic network, these key groups of individuals may embed their beliefs, values, and preferences into the policy design, formulation, and implementation. Therefore, these different groups of actors need to be studied, and the various voices they represent in the society must be deciphered. In addition to the stakeholder perspective, this study regards the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) as an explanatory structure for the Taiwanese context. Sabatier (1998) defined an advocacy coalition as people from various positions, which may include elected officials, interest groups, researchers, and think tanks that have similar belief systems. According to Cairney (2012), the ACF seeks to examine policy-making process that contains multiple actors and levels of government. In the ACF, they see the policy-making process as a space for competition between various coalitions of actors who advocate different beliefs about policy problems and solutions (Cairney 2012). Therefore, the framework is also concerned with assessing conflicting goals and technical information in policy processes (Pierce and Weible 2016). In other words, the focus will be directed to the competing interactions among different advocacy coalitions in the policy-making process. In principle, our stakeholder groups are coalitions with various characteristics, traits, preferences, and value orientations. Based on the selected major policy initiatives in the past 15 years, we aimed at getting a better sense of higher education governance and decision-making. The ACF is helpful in guiding our current investigation as to who the main 'coalitions' are and how they shape the policy-making process. Olofsson and Weible (2018) reviewed the application of this framework in the higher education sector and maintained that this approach is an appropriate conceptual framework for examining higher education policy initiatives.

## **3. Research method**

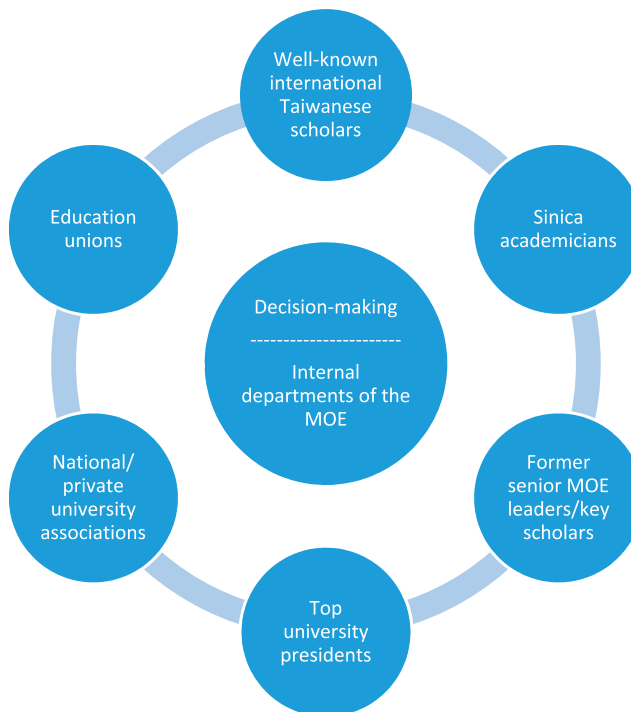
This article explores how higher education policies are affected by the internal stakeholders. In order to identify these different groups of actors effectively, we used two major methods to collect our empirical data: interviews and official documents (e.g. white papers, reports, and meeting minutes). We interviewed six senior bureaucrats (at least at the rank of senior executive officer in the MOE) who were responsible for the drafting of higher education policies and even making decisions along with other top political leaders for the past 15 years. They were the main policy-drafters with rich experiences and have firsthand knowledge of the decision-making processes in higher education in Taiwan. Most of these interviewees worked in the Department of Higher Education, Department of Technical and Vocational Education, and other related departments at the MOE. Each interviewee was asked to respond to the following questions: Who are the most influential groups or figures in the educational and academic communities with respect to higher education decision-making at the ministerial level? How have they exercised their influences on the recent major higher education policies (participation forms and channels)? How do various university presidents, educational groups, and unions influence the policy decision-making? They were also asked to identify other groups or key figures that also play an active part in the process. The

interviews were carried out between 15 February and 8 March 2020, and each session lasted approximately 35–70 min.

As far as official documents are concerned, we purposely collected the published policies, white papers, projects documents, and meeting minutes. Some of these documents do list the names of participants and members. They are regarded as important evidences to inform our conclusions as to who has the power to influence the decision-making. In terms of the major policies from the last 15 years, we focused on the Top University Project (2005), Teaching Excellence Project (2006), Policy Blueprint on foreign student recruitment at higher education (2009), The Construction of Higher Education Center in East Asia (2011), Whitepaper for Talent Cultivation (2013), Institutional Closure/Withdraw (2017), and HESP (2017), among others. All these important schemes had significant impacts on Taiwan's higher education.

#### 4. Six key internal stakeholders

This section presents empirical evidences showing how decision-making in higher education policies over the past 15 years has been influenced by key internal stakeholders. According to the available evidences, we can classify these stakeholders into six major groups according to their roles and functions, as shown in [Figure 1](#). They are well-known overseas Taiwanese scholars, Sinica academicians (中央研究院院士), former senior MOE leaders/key scholars, top university presidents, national/private university associations, and education unions. According to the ACF, these various coalitions have their own values, preferences, and behaviors in their advocacy for certain policy formulation and implementation. In examining their relative influences upon governmental decision-making among these different groups, we also highlight how their influences impacted on specific higher education policies.



**Figure 1.** Six key internal stakeholders influencing higher education policies.

#### **4.1. Well-known overseas Taiwanese scholars**

This unique group of people retains substantial power over decision-making at the inter-ministerial and ministerial levels in Taiwan. They are internationally famous scientists working at top universities, particularly in the US. After their initial academic training in Taiwan, they had moved to Western countries to earn their PhD degrees and then settled down overseas for years with remarkable achievements. In other words, they are the elite in academia and sometimes even in administration. As a unique coalition, these scholars have often been invited by the MOE and even the Executive Yuan (行政院) to offer policy advice and made recommendations related to higher education in Taiwan. As identified by our interviewees and official documents, they are key people who helped to map out the blueprint for higher education (高等教育宏觀規劃委員會) since 2003. These famous international Taiwanese scholars started by shaping the Top University Project in 2005, serving as key consultants in designing and formulating such schemes. Their core values would be academic excellence representing the symbol of international excellence and global perspectives in influencing higher education policies.

#### **4.2. Sinica academicians (中央研究院院士)**

Based on their high academic status like the previous group, the Sinica academicians tend to act as knowledge authority and local elite in advising or planning higher education policies. Academia Sinica, as the preeminent academic institution in Taiwan and under the direct leadership of its president (總統), consists of the most cutting-edge researchers in social sciences, humanities, and sciences of the island-state. These scholars specialize in different disciplines with eminent records in academic achievement. Like the previous group, they are frequently invited by the MOE and governments to advise on new schemes and initiatives (e.g. the Top University Project) and on other major issues (e.g. university mergers). Sometimes they even serve as reviewers for project proposals. Therefore, they not only represent the knowledge authority, but also act as independent evaluators of the performance of different universities.

#### **4.3. Former senior MOE leaders/key scholars**

Armed with practical administrative experiences and even interpersonal connections to previous technical bureaucrats, some former senior MOE leaders are considered to be key internal stakeholders influencing decision-making. They are widely recognized as having personal knowledge with regards to policy history, delicate decision-making dynamics, and hands-on experiences (Ozmen 2010). They were consulted from time to time by the current MOE policy-makers as well as some political leaders.

In addition, several key scholars/researchers having the full trust of high political figures or organizations can be identified. They are authorized to be deeply involved in the decision-making process at the MOE in order to advise on the appropriateness of proposed policies (Interviewees A and D). Given their strong political connections, their involvement is quite extensive and sometimes even at the operational level and technical issues. They serve as bridges to ensure that certain political objectives are achieved at the ministerial level (Interviewees A and F). According to the ACF, this coalition is a quasi-MOE who are well-informed and have direct influence on certain policies.

#### **4.4. Top university presidents**

As a mature democratic country, leaders of top HEIs are frequently engaged in the policy-making process (some of them are also Sinica academicians). Nearly all interviewees acknowledged that these presidents were key players when drafting new policies and schemes. The MOE needs their input regularly in order to formulate appropriate and feasible policies before formal implementation.

Their participation can be found at multiple levels and they also play a prominent role in the technicality of various policies so as to ensure smooth implementation. They are engaged in a wide range of decision-making processes, ranging from debating, drafting, reviewing, and formulating plans to actively participating in the implementation of the plans. From time to time, these leading presidents also express their concerns and opinions through the mass media or professional organizations, which might have a direct impact upon final policies. These top university presidents are usually involved in policies that deal with financial allocations, student quotas, and institutional mergers (Interviewees E and F).

#### **4.5. University associations**

University associations comprise different types of institutions representing various interests. In the Taiwanese context, there are four types of university associations. Interviewees C and E pointed out that they have the power to influence policies through collective opinions and negotiations with the government. Furthermore, some associations have often expressed their concerns through media exposure on certain issues, such as recruiting international students (Interviewee B). In general, the MOE is open to interact with these professional organizations for policy advice and implementation efforts. Private university associations tend to focus on issues such as tuition fees, teacher issues, and institutional governance while the national university associations are more concerned with financial allocation or even institutional mergers.

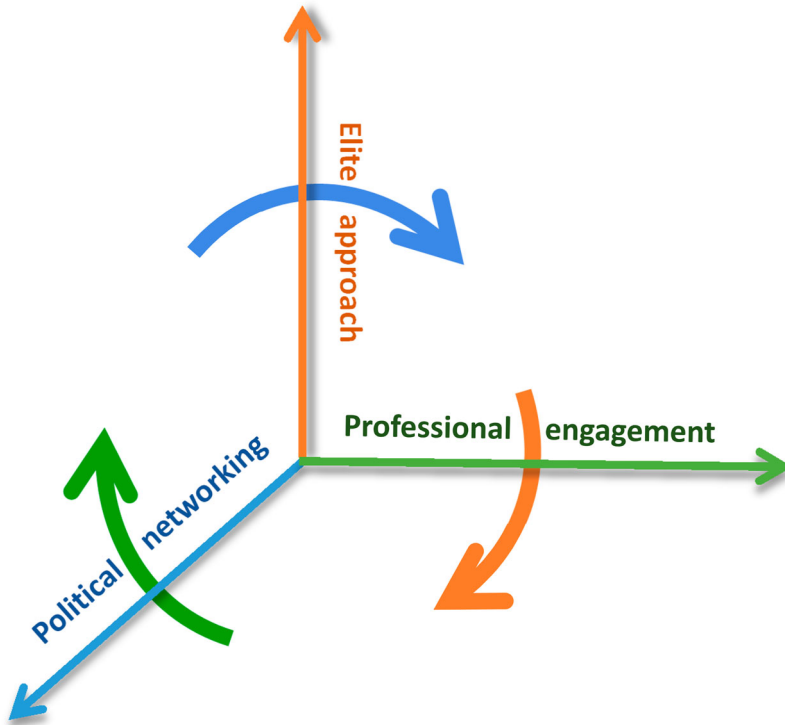
#### **4.6. Education unions**

Finally, another emerging influential stakeholder is education unions. These organizations include individual teachers and faculty and they play a monitoring role for government policies. Their concerns center on teacher evaluations, faculty welfare/well-being, and working conditions (Interviewees A and C). In recent years, institutional closures/withdrawals due to Taiwan's declining birth rate have become a major concern and education unions are directly involved on these policies (Interviewee F). As observed, the channels that education unions use to influence policies are entirely different from the previous five groups. They usually mobilize teachers, launch movements, hold press conferences, and even file lawsuits in order to exert their influence. This coalition aims to protect teachers' benefits, welfare, and work conditions.

Sometime such a position contradicts the stance held by the elite scholars and university presidents, who always prioritize institutional objectives (Interviewees E and F) instead of personal interests.

### **5. Influential paths of internal stakeholders: a three-force model**

After discussing the six major groups of stakeholders, we now turn to how they exercise their influence. What are the major paths by which stakeholders are able to exert their power during the decision-making process or the ways they exert their influence? Interviewees described three major paths, as shown in [Figure 2](#): elite approach, professional engagement, and political networking. Internal stakeholders may utilize more than one influential path, depending on their roles and functions. Therefore, a specific type of stakeholder can mobilize different influential paths. For example, top university presidents as academic elite can also exercise political networking. These three forces can dynamically drive the formation of policy-making simultaneously. At the same time, although this three-force model of internal stakeholders is based on the Taiwanese context, it might be applicable to other Asian societies with a similar culture.



**Figure 2.** The influential paths of internal stakeholder: a three-force model.

### 5.1. Elite approach

Our empirical evidence has shown that some major players in higher education are elite in nature. Prestigious overseas scholars and Sinica academicians are the top leaders in their academic fields. This elite approach can also be applied to the top university presidents as they also occupy the apex of an academic hierarchy. For the legitimacy of the decision-making process, their engagement increases credibility and respectability while promoting macro policies such as the HESP (高等教育深耕計畫) because prestigious overseas scholars represent an international perspective (Interviewees E and F). Moreover, their opinions in Taiwan tend to be considered as reliable and authoritative due to the Confucian culture (Chan and Yang 2017). Similarly, Sinica academicians' participation is a powerful tool to justify that the policies are formed and supported by high-level intellectuals in Taiwan. Such an image, reflecting the cultural uniqueness in Asian countries, explains the differences in the decision-making process between the East and the West where leading academics are rarely invited to express their views and ideas. This influential path indeed illustrates that the general process of decision-making in higher education is definitely influenced by the elites in Taiwan.

### 5.2. Professional engagement

Another notable path is professional engagement. As mentioned earlier, university associations and education unions are primarily representatives of the power of professionals in Taiwan. However, these two groups have starkly different positions. The university associations are much more cooperative with policy-makers whereas the unions tend to be more confrontational (Interviewees B and F). Nevertheless, both these groups gain their power from their expertise and professional knowledge. In addition, former senior MOE leaders are also professionally oriented in terms of their extensive practical experiences in policy-making. In brief, university associations specialize in operating



universities while unions are experts in faculty issues. All these features contribute to professional engagement, albeit in different ways.

### 5.3. Political networking

The final path is political networking. As discussed earlier, some key scholars and university presidents exert strong influence on policy-making because their ideological positions are in line with the ruling party at the time. If this alignment exists, then political networking can effectively drive policy. In addition, there is a softer version of political networking, that is, the linkage between local development and the higher education sector. The university plays a critical role in boosting regional development. Some local politicians, such as lawmakers and university leaders, might work together to pursue specific objectives in higher education. For example, increasing the provision of medical doctors in some regions is a case in point on how political networking had influenced the higher education decision-making process (Interviewees A, D and E). To sum up, political networking can be identified as a distinctive force in shaping higher education policies.

## 6. Conclusion

Our research findings show that internal stakeholders have been influencing higher education policies in Taiwan for the past 15 years. Using their own channels, different groups of internal stakeholder work as coalitions to exercise their power over the direction of higher education policy. Their main concern and advocacy vary according to their distinctive roles and functions. They all have their own positions and agenda as discussed in Section 4. For instance, education unions are concerned with the faculty welfare and would compete with other stakeholders in the policy-making process (Pierce and Weible 2016). These various coalitions dynamically shape the policy decision-making as the predicted by the ACF. Therefore, at the conceptual level, the ACF retains explanatory power in illustrating such dynamics in the Taiwanese context.

Our analysis proposes a three-force model to describe the influential paths which different internal stakeholders mobilized in the Taiwanese context. Surprisingly, the academic elite (including international Taiwanese scholars) have been a very strong force in steering Taiwanese higher education policy. This is quite different from similar situations in Western countries where such group of internal stakeholders tends to be regarded as experts or specialists in an academic subject rather than planners or decision-makers for the higher education system. Their unique role deserves greater investigation in terms of policy formulation.

Professional engagement for the past 15 years has become a regular feature in the policy-making process. Their roles are relatively diverse, but critical when implementing policy. In addition, political networking has become increasingly important in Taiwan. It is similar to the lobbying behavior in the United States (Cook 1998), but in a more subtle and implicit manner in Taiwan. Very few studies have been directed to this decision-making process in the East Asian region. Our analysis serves as a useful conceptual framework for understanding the complicated influential paths of internal stakeholders.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## References

- Balbachevsky, E. 2015. "The Role of Internal and External Stakeholders in Brazilian Higher Education." In *Higher Education in BRICS Countries*, edited by Simon Schwartzman, Rómulo Pinheiro, and Pundy Pillay, 193–214. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Braun, D., and F.-X. Merrien. 1999. "Governance of Universities and Modernisation of the State: Analytical Aspects." In *Towards a New Model of Governance for Universities? A Comparative View*, edited by D. Braun and F.-X. J. Merrien, 9–33. London/Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.

- Brenna, J. 2010. "Burton Clark's the Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective." *London Review of Education* 8 (3): 229–37. doi:10.1080/14748460.2010.515122.
- Cairney, P. 2012. *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Chan, S. J. 2010. "Shifting Governance Patterns in Taiwanese Higher Education: A Recentralized Future?" In *The Search for New Governance of Higher Education in Asia*, edited by Ka-Ho Mok, 139–52. London: Palgrave.
- Chan, S. J., and C. C. Yang. 2017. "Hybrid University in Taiwan: The Prominence of Traditional Intellectuals." *Studies in Higher Education* 42 (10): 1853–69. doi:10.1080/03075079.2017.1376869.
- Chan, S. J., and C. Y. Yang. 2018. "Governance Styles in Taiwanese Universities: Features and Effects." *International Journal of Educational Development* 63: 29–35. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.10.007.
- Chou, C. P. 2008. "The Impact of Neo-Liberalism on Taiwanese Higher Education." In *The Worldwide Transformation of Higher Education*, edited by D. Baker, and A. Wiseman, 297–312. Bingley, UK: JAI.
- Chou, C. P., and G. Ching. 2012. *Taiwan Education at the Crossroads*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chou, C. P., H. F. Lin, and Y. J. Chiu. 2013. "The Impact of SSCI and SCI on Taiwan's Academy: An Outcry for Fair Play." *Asia Pacific Education Review* 14: 23–31. doi:10.1007/s12564-013-9245-1.
- Cook, C. E. 1998. *Lobbying for Higher Education: How Colleges and Universities Influence Federal Policy*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Goedegebuure, L., and H. de Boer. 1996. "Governance and Decision-Making in Higher Education." In *Tertiary Education and Management 2*, edited by Nicoline Frølich and Kurt De Wit, 160–9. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lo, W. Y. W. 2014. *University Rankings: Implications for Higher Education in Taiwan*. Singapore: Springer.
- McNay, I. 1999. "Changing Cultures in UK Higher Education: the State as Corporate Market Bureaucracy and the Emergent Academic Enterprise." In *Towards a New Model of Governance for Universities? A Comparative View*, edited by D. Braun and F.-X. Merrien, 34–58. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mok, K. H. 2014. "Promoting the Global University in Taiwan: University Governance Reforms and Academic Reflections." In *The SSCI Syndrome in Higher Education: A Local or Global Phenomenon*, edited by C. Chou, 1–23. Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Ness, E. C., D. A. Tandberg, and M. K. McLendon. 2015. "Interest Groups and State Policy for Higher Education: New Conceptual Understanding and Future Research Directions." In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research Vol. 30*, edited by Michael B. Paulsen, 151–86. London: Springer.
- Olofsson, K. L., and C. M. Weible. 2018. "Advocacy Coalition Framework, Higher Education." In *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*, edited by P. Teixeira and J. Shin. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Ozmen, F. 2010. "The Capabilities of the Educational Organizations in Making use of Tacit Knowledge." *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 9: 1860–5. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.12.414.
- Pierce, J. J., and C. M. Weible. 2016. "Advocacy Coalition Framework." In *American Governance*, edited by Stephen L. Schechter, Thomas S. Vontz, Thomas A. Birkland, Mark A. Graber, and John J. Patric, 22–23. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, Cengage Learning.
- Sabatier, P. A. 1998. "The Advocacy Coalition Framework: Revisions and Relevance for Europe." *Journal of European Public Policy* 5 (1): 98–130. doi:10.1080/13501768880000051.
- Shin, J. C. 2013. "The World-Class University in Different Systems and Contexts." In *Institutionalization of World-Class University in Global Competition*, edited by J. C. Shin and B. M. Kehm, 1–13. Singapore: Springer.
- Shin, J. C. 2018. *Higher Education Governance in East Asia: Transformations Under Neoliberalism*. Singapore: Springer.