

Exploring The Impact of Credit System Reform on Curriculum Quality, Teacher Support, and Student Services: A Qualitative Study of Innovative Management Mechanisms in Yunnan Province Universities

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Abstract - This study examines the impact of the credit system reform on curriculum quality, teacher workload, and student services in universities in Yunnan Province, China. The credit system reform, designed to offer students greater autonomy in their academic pursuits, has been widely adopted across Chinese higher education institutions. However, its implementation has presented various challenges, especially in under-resourced regions such as Yunnan. The study employs a qualitative approach, gathering insights from faculty members, administrators, and students through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that while the credit system has allowed students to personalize their academic pathways, it has also led to curriculum fragmentation and scheduling conflicts, hindering the effectiveness of the reform. Faculty members reported increased administrative burdens, including adapting course designs, assessments, and providing more individual mentorship. Furthermore, student services, particularly academic advising, were found to be insufficient, with many students experiencing challenges in navigating the credit system. This study highlights the need for more consistent faculty development programs, better course scheduling coordination, and enhanced student advising services to support the credit system's success. The findings also suggest that universities in resource-poor regions must receive targeted support to overcome disparities in funding and infrastructure. The study concludes by offering recommendations for improving the implementation of the credit system, including ongoing faculty training, investment in academic advising, and equitable resource allocation. These steps are essential for enhancing the flexibility and effectiveness of the credit system reform in Yunnan Province and similar regions.

Key words: Credit system reform, curriculum quality, teacher workload, student services, higher education, academic advising, faculty development, educational reform.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education in China has undergone significant transformations, with the adoption of a credit-based system aimed at promoting flexibility in curriculum design and student learning pathways. Unlike the traditional rigid, year-based system, the credit system allows students to select courses based on their interests, academic goals, and career aspirations (Take & Shoraku, 2017). This reform is intended to enhance student autonomy, facilitate

In Yunnan Province, where universities serve a diverse student population, the impact of credit system reform is particularly significant (Deng et al., 2022). Many students in the region come from rural or ethnic minority backgrounds, requiring universities to develop more inclusive and adaptable learning structures. While the credit system aims to provide greater flexibility, universities face difficulties in balancing academic rigor with student choice. A key concern is whether universities can maintain curriculum coherence while offering a wide range of elective courses (Prøitz, 2021). Institutions also have to address challenges such as ensuring that students take courses in a logical sequence, preventing credit mismatches, and maintaining academic standards.

Faculty members also experience significant changes under the credit system. In addition to their teaching responsibilities, they are expected to provide academic guidance, redesign courses, and collaborate across disciplines. The shift from fixed course structures to a more dynamic system requires faculty members to develop new instructional strategies and adapt to varying student needs (Crawford & Jenkins, 2016). However, many universities in Yunnan lack sufficient training programs and institutional support to assist faculty members in this transition. Without adequate resources and professional development opportunities, faculty may struggle to meet the demands of the new system.

Another critical aspect of the credit system reform is the provision of student services. Since students have more flexibility in selecting courses, they require robust academic advising to ensure they make informed decisions. Effective student support services, including academic counselling, career guidance, and mental health support, are crucial for helping students navigate the complexities of the credit system (Millet, 2020). However, universities often face challenges in delivering these services effectively, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Without proper guidance, students may struggle with course selection, risk delaying their graduation, or experience increased academic pressure.

Despite the increasing adoption of the credit system across China, limited research has been conducted on its practical implications, especially in less developed provinces like Yunnan. Most existing studies focus on national policies or the experiences of top-tier universities, leaving a gap in understanding how the reform affects institutions in more diverse and resource-limited contexts. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how credit system reform influences curriculum quality, faculty support, and student services in Yunnan's universities,

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providing insights into the successes and challenges of its implementation.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the impact of credit system reform on various aspects of university management and student learning experiences. Specifically, it seeks to examine how curriculum quality is maintained in the new system, how faculty members adapt to the reform, and how student support services are structured to meet the needs of a more flexible learning environment.

The first objective is to analyse how the credit system reform influences curriculum quality in Yunnan Province universities. This involves examining how universities have restructured their curricula to accommodate credit-based learning, how course availability and scheduling impact students' academic experiences, and how institutions ensure that students receive a well-rounded education. The study also aims to identify potential challenges in maintaining curriculum coherence, academic standards, and learning outcomes in a more flexible academic environment.

The second objective is to investigate the challenges and opportunities for faculty members under the credit system. Faculty members play a crucial role in ensuring the success of the reform, as they are responsible for designing courses, guiding students, and adapting their teaching methods to a more student-centred approach. This study explores how faculty members perceive their roles within the credit system, the extent of institutional support they receive, and the challenges they face in adjusting their teaching strategies. Additionally, it examines faculty workload, interdisciplinary collaboration, and professional development opportunities provided by universities to facilitate this transition.

The third objective is to assess the effectiveness of student support services in the credit system environment. Since the credit system places more responsibility on students to plan their academic journeys, effective support services are essential in helping them navigate course selection, credit transfer, and graduation requirements. This study evaluates the accessibility and quality of academic advising, career counseling, and other student support mechanisms. It also identifies gaps in these services and explores potential strategies for improving student guidance and well-being in the credit-based system.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Credit System Reform in China's Higher Education

The shift from a traditional rigid academic structure to a flexible credit-based system represents a fundamental transformation in China's higher education landscape. This reform aims to grant students greater autonomy in designing their academic pathways, allowing them to select courses based on their interests, career aspirations, and learning pace. According to Li (2023), the credit system reform is intended to foster interdisciplinary learning, improve educational quality, and align university education with global trends. However, the practical implementation of the credit system varies significantly across institutions,

with inconsistent policy execution and uneven resource allocation emerging as major challenges.

Universities in less developed regions, including Yunnan, face greater obstacles in implementing the credit system effectively. Liu and Hou (2021) highlighted that these institutions often struggle with limited financial resources, inadequate faculty training, and a lack of technological infrastructure needed to support credit-based learning. Additionally, the administrative complexities of credit transfer, course registration, and graduation requirements create difficulties for both students and faculty. The gap between policy objectives and on-the-ground implementation raises concerns about whether the reform can achieve its intended goals, particularly in institutions with fewer resources. Therefore, while the credit system holds significant potential for improving higher education in China, its success depends on addressing these institutional and regional disparities.

Curriculum Flexibility and Quality

One of the central advantages of the credit system is its emphasis on curriculum flexibility, allowing students to customize their learning experiences by choosing from a wide range of courses. Ideally, this approach promotes personalized learning and accommodates diverse student needs. However, research suggests that the practical implementation of curriculum flexibility is often accompanied by unintended challenges. Li et al. (2023) argued that while students benefit from greater course selection, curriculum fragmentation and scheduling conflicts frequently arise, undermining the coherence of their academic progress.

In many universities, students struggle to enroll in required courses due to over-subscription or misaligned course scheduling. This can lead to delays in graduation, difficulties in maintaining academic progression, and inconsistent learning experiences. Additionally, a lack of coordination between different academic departments can result in duplicated courses, gaps in essential learning outcomes, and an overall decline in curriculum quality. Without careful institutional oversight and curriculum planning, the intended benefits of the credit system—such as interdisciplinary learning and student autonomy—may be compromised. Therefore, ensuring curriculum coherence and quality within the credit-based system remains a critical challenge for universities, particularly in Yunnan, where institutional capacity varies widely.

Teacher Workload and Institutional Support

The transition to a credit-based system has significantly impacted faculty roles and responsibilities, with many educators facing increased administrative workloads. Li and Li (2023) reported that faculty members are now required to engage in complex course design, individualized student mentoring, and more rigorous assessment procedures, all of which contribute to a growing administrative burden. Unlike the traditional fixed curriculum model, where course structures remained largely unchanged, the credit system demands continuous curriculum revision, coordination with other departments,

and flexible teaching strategies to accommodate diverse student needs.

Moreover, faculty members are expected to provide ongoing academic guidance, assisting students in course selection and career planning (Smith & Gillespie, 2023). While some universities have responded by offering professional development programs and training workshops, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies widely. In many institutions, faculty members receive little institutional support, leading to concerns about faculty burnout and declining teaching quality. The additional workload can also reduce the time educators have for research and professional growth, further impacting their job satisfaction and long-term career development. Addressing these issues requires universities to implement structured faculty support mechanisms, including workload redistribution, financial incentives, and more comprehensive training programs.

Student Services and Academic Guidance

A successful credit-based learning environment depends on strong student support services, particularly in academic advising and career guidance. The increased flexibility of the credit system places greater responsibility on students to navigate their academic pathways, making effective guidance essential for their success. However, Wang et al. (2018) noted that many universities struggle to provide adequate academic advising due to insufficient staffing, inconsistent policies, and a lack of personalized support mechanisms.

In some institutions, students report difficulties in accessing timely and relevant academic guidance, leading to challenges in course selection, credit transfer, and graduation planning. Additionally, disparities in advising quality across different academic departments can result in inequitable student experiences, with some receiving more support than others. The lack of comprehensive student services is particularly pronounced in Yunnan's universities, where limited institutional resources constrain the availability of one-on-one academic counselling and career development programs.

Beyond academic advising, student support services must also address the broader challenges associated with credit-based learning, including mental health support, financial assistance, and career planning. Without these essential services, students may experience increased academic stress, uncertainty about their future career paths, and difficulties in completing their degree requirements (Travis et al., 2020). Strengthening student support mechanisms is therefore a crucial factor in ensuring the long-term success of credit system reform in Chinese universities.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research design to explore the impact of credit system reform on curriculum quality, teacher support, and student services in universities across Yunnan Province. The decision to use qualitative methods stems from the need to deeply understand the personal experiences, challenges, and institutional

responses associated with the implementation of the credit system. This approach is best suited for capturing the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of stakeholders such as university administrators, faculty members, and students, providing a comprehensive view of the reform's influence on educational practices. Qualitative methods, through in-depth interviews and document analysis, enable the collection of rich, detailed data, offering valuable insights into the intricacies of the credit system's effects.

Research Design

The study adopts a phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 2017), a specific qualitative methodology focused on understanding participants' lived experiences within a particular phenomenon—in this case, the impact of credit system reform. Phenomenology is an ideal choice for this study as it seeks to explore and interpret the meaning participants assign to their experiences in the context of Yunnan universities. The objective is to understand how stakeholders (administrators, faculty, and students) perceive and navigate the changes brought about by the credit system reform. The research will be guided by questions that allow for a deep exploration of these experiences, and the data will be analyzed to identify common themes and insights that illuminate the complexities of implementing this educational reform.

Research Setting and Participants

The research will take place in four universities across Yunnan Province, selected for their involvement in the credit system reform and diverse characteristics. The study will include a mix of public and private institutions, as well as universities of varying sizes and academic focuses, to capture a range of experiences and practices related to the reform. The choice of universities reflects a deliberate effort to gather insights from institutions with differing resources and challenges in implementing the credit system.

Participants will be selected using a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring that individuals with direct experience and relevant knowledge of the credit system reform are included. The study will involve university administrators, who play a key role in overseeing the reform and policy implementation; faculty members, who are directly affected by changes in curriculum and teaching practices; and students, who experience the practical implications of the reform in their academic journeys. Approximately 20–30 participants will be involved in the study, with adjustments made based on the saturation of data.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary method of data collection will be semi-structured interviews. This format allows for flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives while ensuring that key topics are consistently addressed across all interviews. The interview questions will be open-ended, focusing on issues such as the impact of credit system reform on curriculum quality, the challenges faced by faculty in adapting to the

new system, and students' experiences with academic support and advising services. The interviews will allow for a deeper exploration of how these stakeholders perceive the credit system's implementation and its effects on their academic and institutional experiences.

The interviews will be conducted either in person or via online platforms, depending on the availability of participants. Each interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes, with prior consent obtained to record the conversations. All interviews will be transcribed verbatim for detailed analysis.

Document Analysis

In addition to interviews, document analysis will be employed to supplement the interview data. Institutional documents, such as university policies, credit system implementation guidelines, faculty training materials, and student support service protocols, will be reviewed to provide contextual information on how universities are officially managing the credit system reform. This approach will offer a complementary perspective, helping to contrast the perceptions of participants with the formal strategies and structures in place at the institutional level.

Data Analysis

The collected data will be analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process will involve several stages: (1) **Familiarization with Data:** Initially, the researcher will immerse themselves in the data by transcribing and reading through the interview recordings to gain an overall understanding of the content. (2) **Initial Coding:** The researcher will then begin coding the data, identifying significant excerpts and labelling them with relevant codes that capture the key ideas or concepts mentioned by participants. (3) **Theme Development:** The codes will be grouped into broader themes that reflect the key issues related to curriculum quality, teacher support, and student services. These themes will serve as the primary focus for analysis. (4) **Interpretation:** The final stage will involve interpreting the identified themes in the context of the existing literature on credit system reform. The analysis will seek to answer the research questions and provide a nuanced understanding of how the reform is perceived and experienced by stakeholders in Yunnan universities. To facilitate the analysis, the researcher will use NVivo software, which is designed for qualitative data analysis and will help in organizing, coding, and categorizing the data efficiently.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, several strategies will be employed: Triangulation: Data from multiple sources (interviews and documents) will be used to cross-check findings and enhance the validity of the conclusions drawn. Member Checking: Participants will have the opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of

their interview transcripts and the interpretation of their responses, ensuring the credibility of the data. **Thick Description:** The research will provide detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences and the context in which they are situated, allowing readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other settings. **Peer Debriefing:** The researcher will engage with academic peers to discuss the emerging themes and interpretations, ensuring the analysis remains grounded in the data and free from researcher bias.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section delves into the findings of the study and discusses the various impacts of the credit system reform on curriculum quality, teacher workload, and student services in universities across Yunnan Province. These findings are analysed and compared with existing literature to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the reform's outcomes.

Impact of Credit System Reform on Curriculum Quality

The findings suggest that the credit system reform has introduced significant changes to curriculum structure, particularly in terms of flexibility. Many faculty members and students appreciated the personalization that the reform allows. For students, the shift to a credit-based system was viewed as a positive development, as it enabled them to tailor their academic pathways according to their career goals and interests. For instance, one student noted:

"I can choose from a wider variety of subjects that fit my professional aspirations. This allows me to develop a unique skill set, which wasn't possible under the old system." (Interview 4, Student)

However, while curriculum flexibility is generally viewed as a positive change, it has not been without its drawbacks. Faculty members and administrators pointed out several problems, particularly regarding curriculum fragmentation. The wide range of electives available to students sometimes resulted in overlapping course offerings, which led to scheduling difficulties. Students often found it difficult to balance their course selections due to these conflicts. As one administrator explained:

"The variety of courses is exciting, but students often have to choose between courses that overlap. This diminishes the effectiveness of the reform in offering true academic flexibility." (Interview 8, Administrator)

Moreover, the absence of a unified curricular framework meant that students sometimes pursued disjointed academic tracks that lacked coherence. This, in turn, created challenges for universities in ensuring that students were well-prepared for their professional careers. This observation aligns with Lei and Hu (2019) research, which notes that while credit systems theoretically promote student autonomy, practical barriers like scheduling

conflicts and fragmented curricula undermine their effectiveness.

Despite these challenges, some faculty members acknowledged that the reform encouraged innovation in course delivery. For example, the ability to offer modular courses or online learning options has opened new avenues for engaging students in different ways. However, as another faculty member noted:

"While innovation is encouraged, we sometimes struggle to integrate these new approaches into a coherent teaching strategy. The flexibility of the system is great, but it requires a lot more coordination and effort from us." (Interview 7, Faculty)

This suggests that while curriculum flexibility is an essential component of the reform, universities need to focus on creating more integrated course structures to ensure that students can navigate their academic journeys efficiently.

Teacher Workload and Institutional Support

The reform has significantly impacted the workload of faculty members, with many reporting an increase in administrative and teaching responsibilities. The introduction of new courses, revised syllabi, and additional student support activities has led to a higher administrative burden. Teachers were particularly vocal about the additional time required to redesign course materials and adjust assessment methods to align with the credit system. One teacher mentioned:

"The credit system means I must update my course content regularly to align with the system's requirements. This extra workload is overwhelming, especially when I'm also trying to provide quality feedback to students." (Interview 2, Faculty)

In terms of institutional support, the study revealed that faculty members generally felt that the universities were not providing adequate resources or training to cope with the new system. Many teachers expressed frustration at the lack of ongoing professional development opportunities related to the credit system. Despite the existence of some professional training programs, their effectiveness was variable and largely dependent on institutional resources. For instance, while larger, more well-funded universities offered regular workshops and seminars, smaller universities often struggled to provide such support due to budget constraints. As one faculty member from a smaller university remarked:

"We hear about workshops, but the reality is that our department lacks the funds to send everyone. There are simply too many tasks that need to be done, and professional development gets pushed aside." (Interview 5, Faculty)

The findings are in line with Liao and Yuan (2016), who argued that the administrative burden imposed by the credit system is disproportionately felt by teachers in less developed regions, where resource allocation is often skewed.

The study also found that while some universities have made attempts to streamline administrative processes using digital tools and course management systems, their implementation has been uneven. Faculty members in more resource-rich institutions were able to take advantage of these technologies, while others in less developed regions were left behind. One administrator noted:

"We are in the process of adopting a digital course management platform, but it's still in the early stages, and not all faculty are comfortable with it. The adoption is uneven, and the learning curve is steep for some." (Interview 6, Administrator)

This highlights the need for a more equitable distribution of resources to support the reform's success, particularly in areas with limited access to technological infrastructure.

Student Services and Academic Guidance

The study revealed that while the credit system aims to increase student autonomy, many students felt that they did not have enough guidance in navigating the new system. Academic advising emerged as a key area of concern, with many students reporting inconsistent or insufficient support in course selection and academic planning. As one student explained:

"I've often felt lost when it comes to choosing courses that fit into my academic plan. The academic advisors are overwhelmed, and there's no clear structure to guide me through this process." (Interview 3, Student)

In addition, some students noted that academic advising was sometimes handled by faculty members who were not well-versed in the intricacies of the credit system. This left students to rely on peer guidance or online resources, which were not always accurate or up to date. One participant commented:

"There is a lack of personalized advice. Many of us end up asking other students or searching online forums for advice, which can be hit or miss." (Interview 5, Student)

This finding supports Marshall (2018), who observed that many institutions struggle to provide adequate academic advising and student support services, particularly in the context of rapidly evolving educational models like the credit system.

Furthermore, the study revealed that while some universities attempted to address these issues by increasing the number of academic advisors and introducing online course registration systems, these efforts were often hindered by staffing shortages or budget constraints. A university administrator explained:

"We've tried to add more advisors and develop better systems, but the workload is overwhelming. The number of students seeking advice far exceeds the resources we have available." (Interview 4, Administrator)

As noted in the literature, this disparity in resources underscores the critical need for more consistent and

comprehensive academic support to meet the demands of credit-based learning.

Institutional Responses and Strategic Adjustments

In response to the challenges identified, several universities in Yunnan have attempted to implement strategic adjustments. Some have focused on digital solutions, such as implementing course management software and student portals, to assist in course tracking and degree planning. While these tools have been praised by students and faculty in larger institutions, the adoption of these technologies has been slower in more resource-poor universities, where limited funding has hindered their effectiveness.

One administrator mentioned:

"We're working on implementing a new platform that helps students track their credits and plan their courses. It's still a work in progress, but it's a step toward improving student services." (Interview 6, Administrator)

However, the uneven distribution of technological resources remains a significant challenge for universities in less developed areas. In these institutions, faculty and students are often forced to rely on more traditional methods of communication, which can be inefficient and slow.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of credit system reform on curriculum quality, teacher workload, and student services in universities within Yunnan Province, China. The findings suggest that while the reform offers promising opportunities for increasing curriculum flexibility and granting students more autonomy over their academic paths, it faces numerous challenges that hinder its full potential. On the positive side, students have benefited from the ability to personalize their academic experiences, but practical obstacles such as course scheduling conflicts and curriculum fragmentation have led to difficulties in effectively utilizing the flexibility intended by the credit system.

Faculty members have reported a significant increase in administrative workload, including course redesign, adaptation of assessment strategies, and more individual mentoring. While some universities have responded with professional development programs, these initiatives have not been consistently implemented, particularly in under-resourced regions like Yunnan. Moreover, the reform has posed challenges for student services. While credit-based learning demands strong academic advising, many institutions have struggled with insufficient staffing and inconsistent guidance, leaving students overwhelmed and under-advised. This affects their academic experience and success. Overall, while the credit system reform holds considerable potential, its success is contingent upon addressing resource disparities, improving faculty support, and strengthening student services.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations must be considered, and they inform the recommendations for improving the implementation of the credit system reform.

First, the study focused primarily on universities within Yunnan Province, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Yunnan's universities, particularly in rural areas, often face resource constraints that may not be applicable to urban universities or those in more developed regions. The experiences of faculty and students in urban, resource-rich universities may differ significantly from those in less well-resourced institutions. This geographical limitation suggests that universities in less-developed areas may require targeted funding to overcome resource disparities. Such funding could support faculty development, improve student services, and enhance technological infrastructure, ensuring that the credit system reform is implemented effectively across all institutions.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from faculty, administrators, and students, which may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall bias. To mitigate these limitations, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach, tracking the long-term impacts of the credit system over multiple years to provide a more comprehensive picture of its effects on curriculum quality, faculty workload, and student support. Additionally, expanding the sample size to include more diverse universities, particularly those from both urban and rural areas, would provide a more balanced view of how the reform is perceived and implemented.

The findings also highlighted that some universities struggle with curriculum fragmentation and scheduling conflicts, which hinder the potential of credit-based learning. To address this, universities should consider creating a centralized course scheduling system that improves coordination between departments and reduces the risk of scheduling conflicts. Curriculum design should be coordinated to ensure consistency across departments, preventing fragmented courses that may confuse students or fail to align with their academic goals.

In terms of faculty workload, while many universities have developed professional development programs to assist teachers in adapting to the credit system, these programs are often unevenly implemented. Universities should prioritize ongoing faculty training and offer peer collaboration opportunities to create a robust support network for educators. This would not only alleviate the increased workload but also enhance the overall quality of teaching, ensuring that faculty feel confident and equipped to navigate the demands of the new system.

Moreover, the reform's impact on student services and academic advising was a significant concern, as many students reported insufficient support in navigating the complexities of the credit system. It is crucial for universities to hire more academic advisors and ensure these advisors are well-trained to assist students in course selection, managing academic pathways, and understanding credit requirements. Universities should also explore the use of digital advising tools, which could help students

track their academic progress and provide timely advice, thereby making the credit system more navigable and transparent.

Finally, the findings suggest the need for more monitoring and evaluation of the credit system reform's implementation. Universities and policymakers should establish frameworks for regularly assessing the impact of the reform, focusing on curriculum quality, faculty support, and student services. A longitudinal study would be particularly valuable in tracking changes in institutional practices, teaching effectiveness, and student satisfaction over time, allowing universities to adapt and improve the system as needed.

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