

Globalization and Higher Education Reform in China

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Introduction

The trend of globalization of world economy has been exerting a strong impact on all nations in the past two decades. The impact is not only on the growth of economy but on all aspects of life. Higher education in China has undergone a historical transition. The change in the international milieu and the internal change of the economic system bring about new challenges to higher education. In response to the challenges, a series of strategies have been adopted to solve the problem of accessibility and to ensure quality in the process of increasing availability of higher education to the people of China.

This paper aims at reviewing the reforms in higher education in China in the context of globalization, pinpointing the conception changes, policy changes, governance changes and consequential changes in curriculum and methodology. What is presented here is grounded in documentation and uses Northeast Normal University as a case as an exemplar.

Changes in Higher Education in China in the Past Two Decades

Reorientation

With the implementation of the reform and the open-door policy in the late 1970s, the Chinese leaders represented by Deng Xiaoping began to realize the importance of education in achieving the national goal of the four modernizations. In the early 1980s Deng proclaimed that education must be reoriented to meet the needs of China's modernization, of the world and of the future. Deng's remark represents a fundamental change in the conception of education. Prior to his proclaim, education in China had long been in the position to serve mainly political ideology and social stability. Deng's thinking of the orientation of education sparked a number of documents which enhanced the conception of the importance of education in the economic development and social progress. Education Law of the People's Republic of China, promulgated in 1985, stipulates:

Education is the basis of socialist modernization, and the State shall ensure priority to the development of educational undertakings. The whole society should be concerned with and support the development of educational undertakings.

Since China began to establish the socialist market economy system, the demand-supply principle has been adopted in education. The role of education has been more widely recognized. The ideology of education as an instrument to serve proletarian politics, which existed in the Mao era, is replaced by a wider conception, which is best expressed by the Report to the 16th Convention of the CPC:

Education is the basis for developing science and technology and preparing talents, playing a leading and comprehensive role in modernization. It

must be placed in a strategic position and given priority in development [.....] Education must adhere to serving the construction of socialist modernization and the people, combine with productive labor and social practice, and prepare socialist builders and successors who have developed morally, intellectually, physically and esthetically.

The development of education has been included in the overall goal of building China into a well-off society. Three objectives are set in developing education in China: 1) to form a national educational system that promotes life-long learning; 2) to prepare hundreds of millions of qualified people to enhance the labor force, dozens of millions of people with expertise, and a large number of creative talents; 3) to provide knowledge for technological innovations, economic construction and cultural prosperity.

The re-conception of education mentioned above laid the foundation for policy changes, curriculum renewal and methodology innovations, to which we turn.

Decentralization

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, a highly centralized educational system was established in the 1950s. The state government assumed the responsibility for planning, administration, deciding on curricula and textbooks and provided the funding. It was realized that the over centralized system stifled the initiatives and enthusiasm of local government and individual institutions. In order to rejuvenate China through science and education, it was necessary to decentralize the governance of education.

The Decision of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on the Reform of the Educational System, promulgated in 1985, started the process of decentralization. In 1993, the Central Committee of CCP and the State Council issued the Program For Education Reform and Development in China. The document declared that "the national policy is to actively encourage and fully support social institutions and citizens to establish schools according to law and to provide right guidelines and strengthen administration".

Regarding the administration of education, the Article 14 of the Education Law states:

The State Council and local people's governments at all levels shall guide and administer educational work according to principles of management at different levels with suitable division of responsibilities.

Education at the second school levels or lower shall be administered by local people's governments under the leadership of the state council. Higher education shall be administered by the State Council and the people's governments of the provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the Central Government.

With regard to provision for higher education, the Higher Education Law of The People's Republic of China states:

In light of the need of economic and social development, the State formulates plans of development of higher education, runs higher education institutions and promotes higher education in various ways.

The State encourages all sectors of society, including enterprises, institutions, public organizations or groups as well as individual citizens, to run higher education institutions in accordance with law and to participate in and support the reform and development of higher education.

The above quotes best express the strategy of the government in developing higher education. The gist of it is twofold: one is the transition from control to guidance in governance; the other is the change from governmental funding as the sole input to plural sources of funding. The policy changes have given impetus to the development of education, particularly to the realization of the goal of mass education.

Enlarging the Scale of Higher Education

In order to accelerate the development of education, the Ministry of Education developed, in 1998, The Plan for Revitalizing Education in the 21st Century. One of the specific goals is to popularize senior high school education in urban and advanced areas, and to enlarge the scale of higher education. It was planned that the gross enrolment rate in institutions of higher learning should have reached 15% by the year 2010. In 2002, the goal was reached, eight years ahead of the schedule. In 2004, the rate rose to 19%. In Shanghai, it was nearly 50%. In Jilin Province, which is a much less developed region, the rate rose to 23%. The national average rate in 1997 was 9.7%. Within five years, higher education in China reached the beginning stage of mass higher education.

Curriculum Renewal

Along with the conceptual and institutional changes, there have been changes in curricula in institutions of higher learning. In June 1999, the Third National Working Meeting on Education was held by CCP and the State Council. The central theme of the meeting is to deepen educational reform and to promote quality-oriented education. The document issued after the meeting reviews the global trend and achievements and shortcomings of education in China. It is pointed out that the educational concepts, institution, structure, the mode of teaching and learning, the content and methodology are out of date. Quality-oriented education aims at upgrading the quality of the labor force, and preparing builders and successors of socialism who have developed morally, intellectually, physically and esthetically, with abilities to think and to solve problems creatively. Under the guidance of the document, universities and colleges have actively revised the curricula. Among the points of renewal, three are worth particular attention.

Firstly, the integration of sciences and humanities in the curriculum is advocated to ensure the all-round development of students. Traditionally, the Chinese academic circle attached more weight to ethics and arts to enhance the morality of the elite. After the founding of the republic, a highly specialized curriculum was adopted under the strong influence of the Soviet Union. Even senior high school students were supposed to major either in science or in humanities and social sciences. This mode of curriculum was found problematic in the context of market economy, where graduates must find their job. The lack of flexibility in the curriculum resulted in the graduates' inability to adapt to the requirement of the job. In reacting to the need for talents with expertise and a wide range of knowledge, universities have revised the curriculum in a way that requires science students to take a number of courses in humanities and social sciences, and vice versa. In order to promote the integrative model, the Ministry

of Education has established The Guiding Committee for Teaching Humanities as Minors and selected 30 universities as models for practicing the integrative model.

Secondly, special weight has been given to the teaching of foreign languages and computer science as compulsory subjects. With the accession to WTO, the ability to communicate in a foreign language, particularly English, is emphasized in universities and colleges. In the early years of the open-door policy, English began to be a subject in the national entrance examination, but only a certain percentage of the points was added to the total mark. By the mid 1990s, English became one of the three key subjects (in addition to math and Chinese) in the entrance examination. Entering a university students will continue to learn English at least 4 periods a week for two years. They are expected to pass the Band 4 English Test before graduation. A certificate of passing the test is taken as a requirement for employment by many employers. Similarly, a certificate showing the level of using computer will benefit the graduates in finding a position.

Thirdly, more importance is attached to training in practical skills. In the process of marketization, university graduates are no longer signed to a position, they must find their job through interviews. Learning how to do therefore becomes a more important component of higher education. To enhance students' practical abilities, universities strive to provide better experimental facilities on one hand and to establish bases for practice in enterprises, factories and schools, on the other.

Methodological Innovation

The trend of globalization and the emergence of a knowledge economy has set higher demands on higher education. In 1998, President Jiang Zemin pointed out that creation is the soul of social progress and the sustaining driving force of prosperity, and expressed the hope that universities become the cradles of creative talents. Since then university administrators and professors have been rethinking the mode of teaching and learning in Chinese universities. It is a consensus that the existing classroom activities are generally teacher-centered. The teachers tend to tell, rather than to show. Students are passive, not actively involved. The Higher Education Department of the Ministry started a project in 2003 to select and reward 1500 model courses out of various universities and to have them on line, so as to promote methodological innovations. Over the 300 selected so far are characterized by up-to-date content, the use of multimedia, team teaching and more student activities.

Major Problems and Solutions in the Process of Change

The previous section sketches the major changes in higher education in China that have taken place from 1985 to 2005. What are the issues and problems? How are they solved? These questions will be dealt with in this section.

How to supply expansion

As mentioned above, the government decided at the turn of the century to enlarge the scale of higher education. And the goal was achieved 8 years ahead of the schedule. How was it possible to speed up the construction of infrastructure within such a short period? The policy of decentralization allowed three approaches which helped to solve the problem of supply.

Local government support is one of them. Many Chinese universities of long standing are located in inner cities. When they decided to take in more students the first problem encountered was a shortage of buildings and land. The municipal

governments gave special consideration to universities when they planned to build new campuses. Among the nearly 100 universities of the “211 Project”, about fifty of them have built a new campus in suburban areas. Northeast Normal University as a case epitomizes this approach to expansion. In 2000, NENU purchased 60 acres of land to build the new campus. The municipal government permitted a low price in accordance with a contract with the Ministry of Education to collaboratively construct NENU as a key university. The new campus with a construction area of 240,000 m² now houses 10,000 students, nearly half of the student population.

To establish a win-win partnership with non-government sectors is another approach to solve the problem of input. In the process of marketization, some entrepreneurs look to the logistics in universities for opportunities. Again to take NENU for example, in building the new campus, the university formed a partnership with a local company which agreed to build the student living area. The university was responsible for constructing the teaching area. With the joint effort, the first phase of the project was completed in six months. The campus was put to use within the same year, holding over 4000 students.

Bank loans provided timely support to the expansion. As there is increasing demand for opportunities to attend university, and students pay for part of the cost of their education, bank managers see it as less risky to provide loans to universities. So the majority of universities which have expanded in the past decade have used bank loans to build new campuses or better facilities.

How to guarantee equality in the process of marketization

By “marketization” in Chinese higher education we mean a “process whereby education becomes a commodity provided by competitive suppliers, educational services are priced and access to them depends on consumer calculations and ability to pay” (Yin and White 1994:217). While this has become reality since 1990s, education is still seen as a public cause. The central government still provides the bulk of funding to state-run universities, and the local governments support those run by provinces and municipalities. Income from tuition is only a smaller part of the cost. Even so, some students whose parents are farmers in remote areas or laid-off workers cannot afford to pay. The Ministry of Education orders that no recruited students should be turned down due to inability to pay the tuition. Universities provide support through various ways, including bank loans, part-time jobs and scholarships for top students. In the past few years NENU has waived one year’s tuition for those freshmen whose mark in the entrance exam exceeds 600. In the year 2002, a sum of 7.023 billion *yuan* was provided as loans or stipends for underprivileged students (The Ministry of Education 2004:52).

How to ensure quality in the process of massification

From 1996 to 2000 (the Ninth Five-Year Plan), China’s intake of students in higher education increased substantially. In 2000, students totaled 9,000,000 in 1,041 regular higher education institutions and 771 adult higher education institutions, 2.4 times more than the total in 1990. And in 2003, the student population reached 19,000,000 (The Ministry of Education 2004:51). Entering the Tenth Five-Year Plan, the Ministry of Education adheres to the guideline of deepening the reform, safeguarding the result, raising quality and holding the pace of development. Two important major measures have been taken to guarantee the quality of higher education in the process of decentralization and massification.

One is the control of the student quota. All the universities under the direct

administration of the ministry must apply yearly for approval of the number of students to be taken in. Other institutions apply to the provincial government for the quota, and the total of the province must be approved by the State government. This has effectively held the pace of growth. It is pointed out by the ministry authority at various meetings that China will plan increase of the gross enrolment rate in accordance with the rate of increase of the GDP.

The other measure is the university teaching assessment system. In 2000, the Ministry appointed a specialist group to work out a program for evaluating the capacity of undergraduate education of a university and the actual level of teaching. It consists of 7 first-rank checking items, 19 2nd-rank items and 44 points of observation. The program covers all aspects of undergraduate education, including infrastructure, facilities, teaching staff, administration, teacher performance, student discipline, student abilities, etc. It was tried out in 2002. In the following three years over 180 universities and colleges have been assessed. The rest will have been evaluated by the end of 2007. And after that all institutions of higher learning will be assessed every five years.

Reflections on Higher Education Reform in China

In the preceding sections we have described what has happened in higher education in China in the past two decades and how it was managed. This section is a critical analysis of the reform, delineating what changes are desirable and why, predicting what are the challenges in the years to come.

Historical achievement in accessibility

Higher education in China remained an elite activity in the 20th century. Accessibility was a problem for over 100 years. The problem was deeply rooted in the culture and civilization. Education in China has been traditionally viewed merely as a component of superstructure. The functions of higher education were not fully recognized. The function to serve political stability was emphasized, but the role in economic development was overlooked. In these circumstances, to receive higher education is taken as privilege. Running higher education is assumed to be consumption rather than contribution. For a century the gross enrolment rate never reached 10% (Wu and Wu 2001:197). At the end of the 20th century, the rate was still lower than the average of the developing countries; the average schooling of citizens above 15 was 8 years; only 18% of the employees have received senior high school education, and 5% of them with higher education background. From 1997 to 2004, the gross enrolment rate rose from 9.7% to 19% (The Ministry of Education 2004: 45). This is undoubtedly a tremendous change in the history of higher education in China. The change originated from conceptual change, which triggered the policy of decentralization. The economic function of higher education and the principle of demand and supply are now widely recognized by the authority and the public sector. The expansion of higher education directly and indirectly contributes to the growth of economy and the widening accessibility benefits the citizens.

Plurality in ownership and sources of funding

The policy change of decentralization has resulted in the emergence of plurality in institutional ownership and sources of funding for higher education. For a century higher education institutions in China were public and funded solely by the central or local government. Now nearly one thousand universities or colleges are privately

owned. In addition, within public universities there are 249 newly established independent colleges, which are funded and run privately, holding 680,000 students. This is an innovative means to combine the advantage of public universities with that of private enterprises in running institutions of higher learning. In 2003, the Ministry of Education issued a document to officially support this new type of ownership and to announce the requirements for the establishment of this kind of institutions. It is confirmed that the new type of institutions is an innovative mode and an effective approach to speed up the growth of higher education and to better higher education resources.

Improvement in learning environment and facilities

Tremendous changes have taken place in learning environment and facilities of universities and colleges. In 2003, the campuses occupied an area of 1.36 billion square meters, 5 times that of the year 1980, and the construction area increased to 382,000,000 square meters, 2.5 times that of the year 1998. The Ministry of Education (2004). All the campuses can access the internet. On average, ten students use one computer, and the value of experimental facilities per student is from 3000 to 5000 *yuan* depending on type of institution. The dormitory floor area per student is 6.5 square meters.

Flexibility in learning

Entering the new century, leading universities in China have adopted a credit system, which allows more flexibility in learning. Along with curriculum renewal characterized by the tendency towards general education, universities have changed administration of student affairs. Students are expected to plan their learning and are provided with a more flexible curriculum. They can select their majors after one or two years of study. The rationale is to enhance all-round development. Since 1950s higher education in China had been professionally or specially oriented. During the years of planned economy, graduates were assigned to positions. The shift of the economic system changed the situation. Investigations show that only 50% of graduates are employed in accordance with their specialties (He and Pan 2003). Under this situation, universities have revised the curricula so that students can have more flexibility in individual development. The curricula are meant to be in the mean between professional education and general education. This direction of change has been welcomed by the students.

New challenges

As mentioned above, reorientation of education and new policies have brought about changes in scale, curricula and methodology, which are significant in reaction to the challenges of the new era. In the process of change, however, there have emerged new problems that require immediate action.

Firstly, vocational education lags behind the socio-economic development. Results of investigations show that there are a serious shortage of “silver-collars” in China. As the IT industry, the automobile industry and the service industry are developing rapidly, the preparation of technicians and nurses is far behind the demand. Take the doctor-nurse ratio for example. The world average is 1:2.7, while in China it is 1:0.61. It is estimated that 150,000 nurses need to be prepared each year, if the ratio will have reached 1:1 by the year 2015 (The Ministry of Education 2004). In order to meet the needs, The Ministry of Education and five relevant departments of

the State Council jointly issued a document to accelerate the development of vocational higher education. It is planned that the intake of freshmen of vocational colleges will have constituted 50% of the total enrolment in higher learning institutions by the year 2007.

Secondly, it is a daunting task to narrow regional gaps. The policy of decentralization has brought into full play the initiatives of economically advantageous provinces and municipalities in developing education. The other side of the coin is the enlarging gaps between regions and between institutions. There is recently an issue in the media about how to provide equal opportunities for teenagers all over China for entering well established institutions. Due to various factors, better higher education resources are located mainly in a few metropolitan areas, where the enrolment rate is much higher than other parts. This situation conflicts with the deep-rooted egalitarian ideology. The central government endeavors to solve the problem through various measures, including a national plan for aiding the institutions in Xin Jiang Autonomous Region by famous universities, but the gaps will remain for some time.

Thirdly, it is an urgent task to build first-rate world universities and world-known research universities. In the mid 1990s the government started the “211” project (to build 100 key universities in the 21 century) and, at the end of 1990s, the “985” project (to build several first-rate world universities). The general goal of the two projects is to upgrade the level of higher education as a component of the strategy for advancing China. The focus of the projects is on the preparation of creative talents and the key measure is to enhance faculty development. In the past 25 years, 580,000 Chinese have studied abroad, and 150,000 have returned. World-class universities must be composed of strong faculties. How to attract top scholars is the first and foremost task in building world-class universities. The brain drain problem is yet to be solved in the years to come, although it is optimistically becoming less serious.

Fourthly, how to continue collectivist values and meanwhile to develop the independent mind is a new problem Chinese educators are faced with in the process of reform. In the context of globalization, universities must change, so as to react to internal and external challenges. But it is also a challenge how to continue fine traditions in the process of change. Throughout history, Chinese educators represented by Confucius attached great importance to morality. Students are expected to develop a strong sense of responsibility. Along with the establishment of the socialist market economy system, the society is becoming more and more competitive. The trend of globalization brings about a situation where nations compete and cooperate. How to educate students to be responsible and to be independent in thinking is an important question that arises in higher education in China today. Given the fact that the majority of the student population are the only child who has received different family education than previous generations, this is not an easy problem to tackle. The Central Committee of the CCP held a meeting early this year to call for attention and action to this matter.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the reform of higher education in China, addressing three questions. What changes have taken place? How have they been managed? How to look at the changes? The reform originates from re-conception of education in the context of globalization and the emergence of knowledge economy. Since the adoption of the open-door policy, education has been placed at a strategic position.

This conceptual change itself, as the consequence of the open-door policy, reflects the impact of globalization on China, where the traditional view of education was nationally based. The open-door policy has widened the frame of reference in thinking about issues of education on the part of decision makers, administrators and practitioners. No changes can be successful without consensus. The agreement on the necessity to reorient education has laid the foundation for the strategies to develop higher education in China, including decentralization in governance, expansion of scale, pluralization of sources of provision. These strategic measures, as important changes themselves, have resulted in better practices in institutions. In other words, changes in higher education are systematic, from the decision level, to the governance level, and then to the operational level. The reform has been designed and planned carefully.

The changes are significant progress in that higher education now provides wider and better service for the society and the educated. The widening of access is a historical achievement in China. The rapid increase of gross enrolment means the upgrade of the quality of the labor force and at the same time more opportunities for sons and daughters of citizens to receive higher education. The curriculum reform, methodological innovations, and the excise of national assessment of teaching directly benefit the students.

Admittedly, the progress in higher education in the past two decades is not without paradox. In the process of reform, some new problems arise, such as the uneven expansion in different types of education, the enlarging regional disparities in access and quality in higher education, the relation between continuity of fine traditions and change along with internationalization of higher education. These await further speculation and action.

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