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The Strategies of Reforming Higher Education in China under Global Competition

Abstract

Global competition results in an overall demand for higher skills. In the competitive world, China has no choice but to adjust themselves to become more efficient, productive, and flexible. Higher education in China has played a key role in achieving socialist economy and modernization. Since the open-door policy in the 1980s, there has been a shift from elite to mass education, practice of corporate managerialism in education governance, privatization of education, and spread of transnational education in the tertiary sector. The author first attempts to explore the strategies that have been adopted in higher education reform in China. Then there are reviews of the roles of Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-Class Initiative in higher education reform in China. Higher education reform has allowed mainland China to identify a small group of universities to be measured alongside the best universities in North America and Europe. However, there are also some backwash effects created from these trends of restructuring of higher education in China.

Keywords: global competition, higher education reform, Project 211, Project 985, Double First-Class Initiative in China

Introduction

Globalization is a product of the emergence of a global economy. The process of globalization is seen as blurring national boundaries, shifting solidarities within and between nation-states, and deeply affecting the constitution of national and interest group identities. The potential effects of globalization on education are many and far-reaching, due to its scale and nature. Since the main bases of globalization are knowledge intensive information and innovation, globalization has a profound impact on education (Carnoy, 2002). Almost everywhere in the world, educational systems are now under pressure to produce individuals for global competition, individuals who can compete for their own positions in the global context, and who can legitimate the state and strengthen its global competitiveness (Daun, 2002). Since after the open-up policy of China in 1978 by then President Deng Xiaoping and after joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China has been exposed to the impact of globalization to reform its education system and policies for global competition.

Reforming higher education in a competitive world

Global competition results in an overall demand for higher skills. Suárez-Orozco (2007) argued that global competition leads to an increasing demand for higher skills in

the population as a whole and lifelong learning for all. Global competition also leads to a techno-economic shift. Such a shift results in unemployment in the short term but to a higher standard of living and higher employment in the long term. As the arrival of a global society will also herald that of a knowledge society, the role of education is to enhance a nation's productivity and competitiveness in the global environment.

In the competitive global economy and environment, China has no choice but to adjust to be more efficient, productive, and flexible. Education has been a national priority in China as well as largely understood in terms of national economic survival in a fiercely competitive world. It has been recognized that the production economy is being rapidly overtaken by the knowledge economy. China must take actions to enhance its competitive edge through the development of the knowledge-producing institutions and industries. The development of the knowledge economy through the enhancement of skills and abilities, that is, improved human capital, has become an important agenda in China's educational policy.

The impacts of global competitions on the change to higher education in China manifest in the drastic restructuring of higher education systems, in which values, such as accountability, competitiveness, devolution, value for money, cost effectiveness, corporate management, quality assurance, performance indicators, and privatization are emphasized (Pang, 2016). In general, most of these changes are expressions of a greater influence of the market and the government over the university system. At the core of these changes is a re-definition of the relationships between the university, the state, and the market.

Features of restructuring higher education in China since 1980s

In studying the responses to globalization in educational reforms, Currie (1998) identified a few interesting trends, which include: (i) a shift from elite to mass education; (ii) the practice of corporate managerialism in education governance; (iii) the privatization of education; and (iv) the spread of transnational education.

Since the open-door policy in 1978, there has been a shift from elite to mass higher education in China, driven by the goal of building a knowledge-based economy. This is a result of a shift from economic production to knowledge-intensive services and manufacturing. Rising relative incomes for highly educated labour increases the demand for university education, pushing China government to expand its higher education. It is important to mention that due to corporatization, state universities in China are also run like business corporations. The adoption of business-like approaches has resulted in financial cost savings, increased administrative efficiencies, and retain academic staff through the offering of competitive market remunerations. Such a change resulted in higher education institutions (HEIs) increasingly being required to secure additional funds from external and competitive sources as well as to reduce dependence on the government.

In China, a unique feature of the rapid expansion of private higher education is the emergence of offshore programmes that are offered by foreign universities. The emergence of foreign-linked programmes reflects a growing trend of transnational education, which means that there is a growing volume of higher education being delivered across national boundaries. Education has become increasingly affected by commoditization. In the Chinese context, the boundaries of how, where, and under whose authority education is carried out and certified are well defined by newly established laws and regulations on one hand. On the other hand, these universities

internationalize their campuses, curricula, and teaching staff. By the end of 2019, more than 600 universities across the country have held Sino-foreign cooperatively run institutions and projects, with the number reaching 2,238 (Ren & Tian, 2020). The rapid development of independent universities, such as New York University-Shanghai, Hong Kong Chinese University of Shenzhen and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China are cases in point.

The strategies of reforming higher education in China

Higher education in China has played a key role in building of the economy, scientific progress and social development by increasing the pool of advanced talent and experts necessary to achieve socialist modernization. The overall objectives of higher education reform in mainland China are to smooth the relationships among the state, the market and HEIs, setting up and perfecting a new system in which the state is responsible for the overall planning and macro management while the HEIs follow the laws but enjoy the autonomy to provide education according to the needs of the nation.

The Project 211 and the Project 985 in higher education reform in China

The Chinese administrative system used to be very highly centralized, so did the former higher education system. Education was provided by the central and local governments respectively and directly under their controls. That led the state to undertake too many responsibilities and the HEIs lacking the flexibility and autonomy to provide education according to the needs of the society (Higher Education Center, 2023).

President Deng Xiaoping was the principal architect of reform in the post-Mao era. Since 1976, Deng designed the Four Modernizations programme, which identified agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology as key areas for reform and investment. Modernization with its open-door policy has brought about a new era for China and resulted in a rise in the living standard and a loosening of controls on daily life (Agelasto & Adamson, 1998, p. 4). Under this circumstance, higher education in China accorded a new mission that supported the drives of the modernization and nurtured the necessary human capital.

In 1998, China has stipulated its first Higher Education Law, which determined the reform and development of Chinese higher education in the 21st century. In order to give a boost to higher education, the central government decided to assign priority to a number of HEIs, aiming at building them into world-class universities (Zhu & Lou, 2011). Thereafter, the two most successful projects in the recent reforms of HEIs have been: The '211 Project' from 1996 to 2000, which was designed to foster 100 world-class universities in the 21st century, and the '985 Project' of May 1998, that provided utmost support to China's top universities.

Project 211 was a project of developing 100 comprehensive HEIs and a number of key disciplines for the 21st century, initiated in 1995 by the former State Education Commission of China. It was implemented since 2002 by the Ministry of Education (MoE). The objectives of Project 211 were to: (i) improve the quality of academic disciplines and programs; (ii) re-structure of the higher education system; and (iii) assure the quality of teaching and research up to international standards (Wang, 2010; Fang, 2011). However, the board mission of this project, besides further boosting some top universities in China, also included some universities that were in poorly developed areas, having minor ethnic groups, and disadvantaged in resources' allocation. These universities were weaker than some other universities beyond the project in terms of

comprehensive competitiveness and faculty development. Project 211 might not be sufficient and effective enough to enhance the competitiveness of Chinese higher education in the global context.

President Jiang Zemin, at a conference celebrating Peking University's centennial on 4 May 1998, declared that China would strive to have a number of world class universities of international standards. In 1999, the State Council approved the Ministry of Education's document, *Facing the 21st Century Education Development Action Plan*, which emphasized the support of Beijing University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Zhejiang University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and some other HEIs to build world-class and high-level universities. Then this initiative was named the 'Project 985' and its main objectives were to: (i) build world-class universities which are globally renowned in scientific and social research; (ii) renew the operational mechanisms of HEIs; (iii) enhance the strengths and opportunities in sustainable development; (iv) increase the capabilities of these universities in scientific and technological innovation; and (v) increase the effectiveness and competences of these universities in global competition (Fang, 2011, p. 49). From 1999 to 2002, the central and local governments allocated US \$3 billion to strengthen research and infrastructure at these universities. This state-initiated project has enabled a number of universities to gain resources to become top universities that participated in global higher education competition (Wang, 2010, p. 7).

The reform of the higher education system, since the open-door policy in 1978, was comprehensive and all-round. Re-structuring of higher education has involved areas of ownership, funding, administration, enrollment and graduate employment. With the establishment of socialist market economy, marketization of higher education emerged and developed speedily. The funding resources have been extended to various sources, the efficiency and effectiveness of HEI administration have been increased, and the internationalization of higher education has become more prominent, when the relationship between the state, the market and the HEIs is re-defined under global competition.

The Double First-Class University Initiative since 2016 in China

In June 2016, the Ministry of Education of China declared the abolishment of the Project 211 and Project 985 and announced that they would be replaced by the Double First-Class University Initiative (Chinanet, 2016). The Double First-Class Initiative is a major commitment made by the Chinese government to improve China's higher education and global competitiveness in the international context. The strategies in this reform included talent training, performance evaluation, research management and other key areas (MoE, 2022).

A range of achievements had been made by the end of 2020, including a group of major scientific innovations and critical technology breakthroughs, a few HEIs and disciplines such as Materials Science and Engineering that reached world-class ranking, and prominent progress achieved in Quantum Science and other vital research fields. When the Initiative was started, in September 2017, a total number of 140 universities were included in this plan and seven more universities were included by 2022. These are the top universities in China and make up to around 5% of the total number of Chinese HEIs (3,012) (MoE, 2022). The number of disciplines supported under the Initiative includes 59 basic disciplines such as mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology, as well as 180 engineering disciplines and 92 philosophy and social science disciplines.

As compared to the Project 211 and Project 985, the Double First-Class Initiative as stipulated is a part of major national strategies to invest the future of the nation as well as to enhance the competitiveness of Chinese higher education in the global environment. The Initiative has involved policies (Liu, 2018, pp. 148-149), such as: (i) building on the strengths of the previous two projects, that is, 211 and 985; (ii) meeting the national strategic needs with advancing the development on international cutting-edge science and technology; (iii) prioritizing certain disciplines with Chinese characteristics; (iv) purposefully inclined resources to support some selected universities and disciplines; as well as (v) stressing administrative principles of quality assurance, performance appraisal, accountability, autonomy, flexibility and competition. Liu (2018, pp. 150-151) also criticized that the Double First-Class Initiative is not without problems and challenges. The critique included: (i) the Initiative is not clearly defined and the goals of which are ambiguous; (ii) putting excessive resource largely to promote intra-competition among participating universities and disciplines; and (iii) the tensions between academic autonomy and performance evaluation are difficult to solve.

Nevertheless, the Double First-Class Initiative has completed the first round of trial in 2016-2020. In mid-February of 2022, the MoE of China issued a *Circular on Further Promoting the Development of First-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines* (the Circular) to start the second round of the Initiative. The Circular further clarifies the directions, basic principles, major tasks and supporting mechanism for the new round of the Double First-Class Initiative. It requires universities and disciplines that have been identified as having the potential to become world class to focus on the quality of their development and explore new development models in pursuing solutions to China's issues and serving economic growth and social advancement (MoE, 2022).

Conclusion

Though there is still no universally accepted conceptualization of globalization, what we call "globalization" has brought numerous and profound changes to the economic, social, cultural and political life of nations as well as changes in education. Globalization might entail the imposition of the concepts of competition, market, choice, decentralization and privatization on education, that is, the further infiltration by business forces into education. It might also lead to increased commoditization of education and making quality education only accessible to elite elements of society who can afford it (Kellner, 2000).

Along with the further opening of the higher education sector following China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, international competition and pressure have been intensified and further restructuring and transformation have been introduced. The then Project 211 and Project 985, as well as, the current Double First-Class Initiative have allowed mainland China to identify a small group of universities to be resourced as the flagships of China's higher education sector, to enable them in due course to compete internationally, and to be measured alongside the best universities in North America and Europe.

There are some backwash effects created from these trends of restructuring of higher education in China due to global competition. First, a rapid expansion in higher education may inevitably lead to a fall in the average academic standard and performance of graduates. It is likely that the definition and establishment of quality

will become the prerogative of management rather than academic professionals. When universities become more corporatized, they will be linked more to the market and less to the pursuit of truth. Intellectuals will become less the guardians of the search for truth, and administrators will assume a dominant role. In this regard, norms that have traditionally been part of university life may be questioned. Zajda (2010) warned that when guided by a climate of knowledge as production, the university may become indifferent to subjects dealing with ethics, social justice, and critical studies.

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