agenda of creating a single, pan-East Asian HE community. ■

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China: A World Leader in Graduation Rates

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In its April 2013 edition, *The Economic Observer* posed a simple question: "Are China's Colleges Too Easy?" Although this question may be asked of many higher education systems, the answer given by *The Economic Observer* for China is an unambiguous and resounding yes. China has one of the lowest college dropout rates in the world, with sources from the ministry of education stating that less than 1 percent of students fail to complete their degrees. Rare instances of disciplinary action against students provoke outcries from the affected individuals and their families. While East Asian higher education in general is characterized by high entry requirements and low dropout rates, the latter still hover around the 10 percent mark in South Korea and Japan, a far cry from the situation in China, where failing college remains almost unthinkable.

The Numbers

As part of my data collection for this article, using the "Quality Reports on Undergraduate Education" published by higher education institutions on the Mainland, I cataloged 187 universities and their four-year graduation rates, as well as the bestowal rate of bachelor degrees upon graduation. The mix of universities in the list is diverse, encompassing twelve provinces, rural and urban communities, and institutions of all qualities and sizes. Their average four-year graduation rate in 2013 stood at 97.3 percent. Five institutions allowed 100 percent of students to graduate, while the lowest percentage stood at 84. The rate of bachelor degrees bestowed during that same year stood at 96 percent, lower than the total graduation percentage. Usually, the Certificate of Graduation requires a passing grade in all mandatory courses plus a statutory number of total credit points, while a certain GPA might be required for the bachelor degree.

The quality and ranking of a college do not seem to make a difference, as the graduation percentages for national key universities of the "211 project," which have higher entry requirements compared with provincial ones, fall just less than half a standard deviation below the average. What does make a small difference seems to be geographical location, with Hebei—where a substantial proportion of colleges were upgraded to university status in recent years—reaching an average graduation rate of 98.8 percent, while for Shanghai it drops to a lower 95.9 percent. Several universities have departments that are jointly run with foreign partner institutions, and these tend to be harder to graduate from, averaging slightly above 90 percent.

Ensuring Graduation

Writing for the Chinese magazine *Time Education*, two lecturers from Jiangsu University of Technology, a provincial college with comparatively low entry requirements, touched upon several measures to facilitate timely graduation: lowering the difficulty of makeup exams, coupled with the possibility to retake exams in later semesters or even shortly before the projected graduation date. Another contributing factor is the general lack of competency within the ranks of faculty, together with their unwillingness to accept a greater workload if students were not to pass. The effect on students enrolled at less competitive institutions can be detrimental. In class, many of them play on their phones, read novels, or just sleep. While study outside of class is concentrated around exam weeks and materials relevant toward passing the course exams, even this is neglected if the students are aware that failing multiple exams does not carry sanctions.

Similar concerns were echoed by the authors of the only study on the subject of graduation rates in recent years. Li Zifeng and colleagues from Yanshan University in Hebei province observed that most universities have graduation rates close to 100 percent, with students not being reprimanded for cheating, and teachers choosing to avoid trouble by simply letting everybody pass. Students are not being "cultivated" to perform the functions that are theoretically demanded of them. The authors contrast these facts with Western universities, where requirements are more flexible, yet also more demanding, hypothesizing that these contribute to a higher quality of graduates.

A 2013 article in the *Workers' Daily* reported the case of a university in Hainan, in which the faculty was instructed to let all bachelor students graduate, whether or not they had failed any classes. This also applied to master students, all of whom were allowed to graduate as long as their theses passed a run through plagiarism software. Academic administrators had opted to keep graduation rates high across

the board in order to maintain a positive image and secure future funding, as well as to prevent low-performing departments from being phased out. In such a case, it seems likely that an arrangement to pass everybody would be welcomed by the faculty.

Some Deliberations

The expansion of higher education in China has allowed a record number of people to enroll in college, and has brought benefits to society as a whole. Investments undertaken by the central government have raised the quality and international recognition of educational institutions on the Mainland. I would, however, argue that graduation being almost guaranteed is acting as an impediment to their further development.

As it stands, elite universities enroll the bulk of their students through the *gaokao* (the university entrance exam) and Independent Recruitment. Although the latter method allows universities a more flexible approach to their student intake, not relying on one single determining score, it is also prone to corruption. The most notable case in recent years is that of Cai Rongsheng. During his eight-year tenure as head of the admissions office at Renmin University of China, he took in more than RMB 23 million (US$34 million) in bribes for enrolling particular students. According to the *Beijing Morning Post*, places at renowned universities can be priced as high as RMB 1 million (US$150,000). Independent Recruitment has become a channel for unqualified high school graduates with strong official connections to get into good universities, where they will graduate regardless of their efforts. Under such circumstances, assessment systems designed to weed out low-performing students during the course of their four-year degrees are unlikely to be implemented.

In the case of Renmin University at least, Independent Recruitment has been scaled down considerably since the days of Cai Rongsheng. As numbers from the admissions office show, 192 students were admitted through that process in 2016 (out of 2,797 freshmen in total), which is considerably less than in 2012, when that number stood at 550, around 20 percent of newly enrolled students at the time.

Given the huge pool of qualified candidates, it seems quite imaginable that these universities could achieve graduation rates at the current level, without the need for any particular accommodation toward that end. This would presuppose a transparent, merit-based admission process free of corruption.

As far as provincial universities and colleges are concerned, I am of the opinion that they would benefit from strict graduation requirements to an even greater extent. As of now, the impetus towards numerical growth in enrollment and majors coincides with a mandate to keep graduation rates high as well, independent of actual student performance. A paradigm shift instituted at a number of provincial universities, placing strict value on the quality of graduates instead of their quantity, would help to raise the value of their degrees and alleviate the hierarchical nature which characterizes Chinese higher education.

It is worth noting that a handful of newly established universities that break with established patterns in student recruitment and curricular requirements do in fact exist, among them ShanghaiTech University and Southern University of Science and Technology. It remains to be seen if their graduation practice will differ from, or fall in line with, the vast majority. ■

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Politics and the Universities in Postrevolutionary Iran

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The trajectory of Iranian higher education after the 1979 revolution can be divided into three phases. First, under the revolutionary era (1979–1987), Iranian higher education underwent a first wave of Islamization with the onset of the Cultural Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). Next, followed a period of reconstruction and political development between 1998 and 2004. During that period, the regime released universities from ideological pressures, allowing them to grow more independent from the state. The third period, the "hard-liner era" (2005–2012), saw another round of Islamization and recentralization of the universities.

Higher Education during Revolution and War

Iranian universities enjoyed a brief moment of autonomy as the Pahlavi monarchy came to an end, but their role as political hotspots during the revolution quickly led the government to assert control. Immediately following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, government officials implemented policies intended to regulate and "purify" universities, to cleanse them of any trace of the Pahlavi regime.

University autonomy eroded under the Cultural Revolution Plan. All universities closed for three years until 1982, in order to be "cleansed" of both political and reli-