

Chinese Higher Education 21st Century Challenges

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The 21st century poses challenges for education world wide in an all-around way. The development of the human race in the future will be more civilized and advanced than today. As human societies continue to develop in the 21st century, higher education will play a more prominent role as the base for training qualified personnel. Rapid economic, scientific, technological and social development will set higher demands on higher education for the number and quality of trained personnel for higher education.

In the past 45 years since the founding of People's Republic of China, especially in the last 16 years since the reform and opening of the economy, higher education has experienced great progress. Chinese higher education has already been developed into a multi-mission and multi-level system with a complete range of academic disciplines. These achievements have laid the foundation for further development of higher education in China.

However, with rapid developments in the economy, and in science and technology, Chinese higher education inevitably faces new challenges.

The Conflict between the Increasingly High Demand for and Low Input in Higher Education

The recent decades have been a crucial period of time for China as it works to set up a socialist market economy, to reach the second-phase strategic goals of modernization, and to advance to the third-phase goals. Socioeconomic development will increase the demands on education in every aspect. Besides, China is a large country with 1.2 billion people, with an annual birthrate of 20 million. In spite of the government's birth control policy, the population of China will reach 1.3 billion by the beginning of the 21st century. The population of two age groups of children and teenagers (under 14-year-old) and working-age people (15 to 64 years of age) will be 356 million and 839 million, respectively, constituting enormous demands on formal and informal education in both the compulsory and post-compulsory systems. The fact that the higher education enrollment growth rate was over 20 percent for two years running in 1992 and 1993 is evidence of these trends.

Nonetheless, China is a developing country whose

economic foundation is rather weak. According to 1994 World Bank statistical data, China's GNP per capita for 1992 was U.S.\$470—the 28th-lowest among the 42 low-income economies. In the past decade, despite the considerable increase in the educational budget, the total educational budgetary input remained low. The statistical data for 1993 show that China's educational expenditure is about 1.04 percent of the world's total. However, the number of students in China's formal education system constitute 17.9 percent of the world's total student body. Therefore, facing us are urgent issues of how to depart from the Chinese realities to increase the input in education by both the government and the whole society, how to streamline the educational structure to promote a balance between the development of higher education and socioeconomic development, how to increase the effective utilizing of educational resources, and how best to meet the higher education needs of people.

China's higher education faces new challenges:

(1) The Conflict between the Increasingly High Demand for and Low Input in Higher Education

(2) A Socialist Market Economy: New Demands and Challenges for Higher Education

(3) Rapid Scientific and Technological Development and the Social Progress Call for a Faster and Deeper Reform of Higher Education.

A Socialist Market Economy: New Demands and Challenges for Higher Education

China is currently undergoing a transition from a planned economy to a socialist-market economy, involving reforms in many aspects of economic and social life and posing new challenges for education reform and development.

The old education system was oriented toward a planned economy and was characterized by a high degree of state centralization and direct governmental management. The government was not only responsible for running all higher education institutions, but also for covering student costs of tuition and fees, medical care, and partial living expenses.

Education and economic activities belong to different realms of social functions, each having its own patterns and characteristics.

Teaching was organized under a unified syllabus and curriculum while jobs were assigned for college graduates under a central plan. Both the central and local governments were highly involved in the administration and operation of colleges and universities. Personnel, funding, and facilities were allocated by the government, and universities were run according to the administrative regulations set by the government. The old system hindered social participation in higher education and discouraged the institutions' interests in serving the community.

There was a considerable amount of overlap in institutions' missions and their academic programs, thus keeping the already limited resources from being rationally allocated and utilized, and creating a large amount of waste. The problems of the higher education system had negative effects on moves to improve curriculum and teaching. Therefore, the reform of the higher education system is an important approach to developing higher education in China. Although much work has been done in this regard and some lessons and experience gained, the current higher education system as a whole is still unable to meet the demands of social and economic progress. How to accelerate the pace of higher education system reform has become a pressing challenge for Chinese educators.

Education and economic activities belong to different realms of social functions, each having its own patterns and characteristics. In the course of reform of the educational system, it is necessary to handle properly the relationship between education and socialist market economy. The process of education is long term, and the consequences of educational reform can only be felt after several decades, and thus affects one or more generations. Therefore, when we look at the imperatives of higher education reform, we have to take its demanding and complicated nature into consideration. We ought to **look** at and

learn from the successful experiences of other countries and from our own, and be both positive and cautious at each step we take in our higher education reform.

Rapid Scientific and Technological Development and Social Progress Call for a Faster and Deeper Reform of Higher Education.

The current trend, in which modern science and technology develop, differentiate, and integrate rapidly, calls for a fundamental reform in curriculum and teaching methodology in Chinese universities and colleges. New requirements regarding the **quality** of higher education are raised in the context of a fast-developing economy, expanding international cooperation, and social progress. The constraints of traditional methods have become evident, such as concentration on instruction in specialized knowledge rather than a student's all-around ability. Such practice does not cater to the diversified needs of students, fails to let them take initiative in seeking, analyzing, and applying knowledge, and limits their creativeness.

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Problems such as narrowly defined specialties and irrational disciplinary structure exist. Institutions of different types and levels overlap in their missions and do not play up their own strengths. Instructional content, course structure as well as the organization of knowledge need updating and improvement. There is a gap between what is taught and what is actually happening in social and productive life. In addition, some teaching methods and pedagogies are out of date. It is, therefore, a fundamental requirement for the socioeconomic development of the country that higher education do the following:

- renew educational philosophy and concepts to suit the needs of economic, scientific, and social development;
 - deepen the reform of instructional content and pedagogy; and
 - improve the quality of education *so* that students will have a sense of responsibility, confidence, and basic competency to meet the challenges of the new century.
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