

Ranking Universities in China: Same Game, Different Context

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As an important part of the process of evaluating higher education, university ranking has grabbed increasing attention worldwide. From a global perspective, it parallels the development of higher education, and has long been practiced in economically advanced countries, such as Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Asian and Pacific countries, like Australia and Hong Kong, have followed suit.

University ranking can act as a catalyst for change, but can also be misleading. Merits and faults aside, it is certainly very influential. Not only do people from all walks of life show great concern about results of the process, but it even exerts influence on the international reputation of the higher education system in a specific country, against a backdrop of globalization.

As part of its reentry into the world community, China now conducts regular university ranking. Assessments conducted by the administrative organizations, however, are used as guidelines, are not made known to the public, and therefore, cannot provoke much public interest. Outcomes resulting from independent assessments, however, especially when made public through the media, are gaining increasing attention from the whole society, due to the close connection to universities' reputations.

Governmental Ranking

Governmental ranking involves the order in which the government selects some universities as "key points" for growth, or as institutions enjoying special policy privileges.

From 1954 to 1963, China established 68 "key-point institutions" of higher learning. Although interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, by 1981 96 institutions had been placed on the list. Of these, the then State Planning Commission and the Ministry of Education selected 16 in the 1984–85 academic year, which were approved by the State Council. The institutions thus targeted for the improvement of their teaching and research capacity during the Seventh Five-Year Plan included Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, University of Science and Technology of China, Beijing Medical University, People's University of China, Beijing Normal University, and Beijing Agricultural University.

From 1995 onward, the State Education Commission has selected those institutions that will be the focus for investment (known as the 211 Program) by the national and/

or provincial governments, in an effort to ensure standards, under conditions of limited overall finances. The institutions are selected according to their overall conditions and potential. In actual practice, this ranking not only serves to improve teaching and research, but also sets good examples for less-favored institutions.

The weaknesses of government ranking, however, derive from the highly planned economy and the correspondingly heavily centralized system of higher education. As China has adopted a free-market economy, under which the national government stops running higher education directly and moves to assume more of a steering role, rankings of this sort seem less and less appropriate.

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International Ranking

International ranking is based on quantitative indicators provided by academic research. In 1987, the Institute of Science in the Chinese Academy of Management Science first did a quantitative assessment of the scientific level of Chinese comprehensive universities (in both the mainland and in Taiwan). They used the statistics provided by the Science Citation Index (SCI) of the Institute for Scientific Information to count, by university affiliation of authors, scientific articles published in internationally recognized scholarly journals from 1983 to 1985. The top 10 institutions were Peking University, Taiwan University (Taiwan), University of Science and Technology of China, Nanjing University, Fudan University, Beijing Medical University, Nankai University, Beijing Normal University, Shanghai Medical University, and Jilin University.

Another fairly influential ranking has been conducted by the China Institute of Scientific and Technical Information. It publishes statistics on scientific articles each year, with a university name list based on the statistics collected from SCI, the Engineering Index, and Index of Scientific and Technology Conference Papers, as well as 1,200 Chinese scholarly journals.

On the basis of 1991–1993 statistics, China also listed the top 10 universities to win the State Natural Science Award, the first 20 to win the State Invention Award, the State Scientific and Technological Advancement Award, and the State Education Commission Award for Scientific and Technological Achievement. Universities that have received research grants over 100 and 50 million yuan were also

listed, together with those whose annual output of scientific and technological production exceeded 100 and 50 million yuan.

Naturally, proponents of international ranking try to legitimate the system by using internationally practiced quantitative indicators and methods. As social and cultural institutions, however, contemporary universities are deeply embedded in their societies. This dilemma means that the ranking scheme is simply not powerful enough to measure the weaknesses and strengths of Chinese universities; moreover, the indicators employed are confined to only certain aspects of institutions of higher learning.

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Synthetic Ranking

Another form of ranking is more synthetic, based on evaluations of the academic research achievements of institutions of higher learning, and conducted using several different measures. One impressive effort of this sort was an assessment of the leading 100 institutions (among all the 614 four-year institutions), based on the national statistics of natural and social science research achievement from the then State Education Commission, as well as on interviews with 203 experts, whose comments on the aforementioned data were sought.

The most recent surveys focus on achievements in research and development in Chinese universities. According to this ranking, the top 10 institutions are Tsinghua University, Peking University, Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Fudan University, Central China University of Science and Technology, Southeast University, and Northeast Polytechnic University.

Conclusion

Synthetic ranking is characterized by its use of comprehensive benchmarks. Its methodology is commendable to some degree. Yet, within the whole assessment and ranking process, many artificial factors tend to complicate the environment and make the operation hard to control. It is also hard to reach agreement on what indicators to use and how to weight them. Finally, what is worthy of special attention in the Chinese case is that, since the data used in this ranking are based on the reports of individual institutions to the State Education Commission, some universities resort to deception in order to improve their ratings. ■

Features, Issues, and Future Expansion of Chinese Graduate Education

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Since the resumption of graduate education in China in 1978, the system has experienced a remarkable development. Within the short period of 17 years between 1978 and 1994, 460,000 graduate students were admitted—19.7 times as many as the 23,400 students admitted between 1949 and 1965, before the Cultural Revolution. Between 1978 and 1994, 313,000 graduate students graduated (280,000 with master's degrees and 17,000 with doctoral degrees)—15 times as many as before the Cultural Revolution.

This development merits attention because it is not only unprecedented in China in speed and scale, but because it is also rare in the history of graduate education worldwide. According to available statistics over 17 years (1978–94), China increased its graduate enrollments from 10,900 to 128,000, while the United States, Britain, Japan, and the Soviet Union spent 20, 29, 34, and 31 years reaching the same or similar levels of development respectively. While stressing the achievements in Chinese graduate education, we should also pay attention to its features, issues, and future trends.

Structural Features

From a historical perspective, the evolution of Chinese graduate education has been influenced by many foreign models. The five generations of returning foreign-educated students have had a special role in the process. In the past half century, Chinese graduate education has successively been under the influence of the Soviet Union and the United States due to the impact of Soviet-educated students (“fourth generation”) and of American-educated students (“fifth generation”). Thus the current system of Chinese graduate education is somewhat of a hybrid of the Soviet and American systems, combined with some elements indigenous to China itself. Its administrative structure is more like the Soviet model, while its degree structure bears a resemblance to American counterparts.

There are two main features of the Soviet-inspired pattern: first, the government still has a prominent role in graduate education nationwide, though