

## Center and Periphery: Changes in the Relationship between Chinese Universities and the Central Government

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As China moves toward a market system, the relationship between government and individual universities is changing dramatically. Today, university leaders can make many—but not all—decisions, reporting their results to the Ministry of Education. This shift of authority is not yet complete, however, so no one is quite sure what can and cannot be done. In addition, China is wisely pursuing pilot projects rather than wholesale reform, providing somewhat greater predictability while still changing academic life dramatically.

### *Financial Reforms*

Universities today must raise the majority of their operating funds from such nongovernmental sources as research grants, tuition, gifts, sale of services, and income from university-run enterprises. Sometimes these revenues represent as much as 80 percent of their annual budgets. In addition, campus administrators now have substantial leeway in allocating those funds.

The trend away from the center has been reinforced by a significant reduction in the number of universities receiving support from the national government. The 211 Project (100 top universities for the 21st century) focused central resources on key universities, leaving the rest on their own. And, as the Shanghai government contributes an increasing amount to some of its universities, those institutions are under both central and municipal control.

Chinese university leaders now spend much of their time worrying about finances, a change that is not just fiscal but cultural. In traditional Chinese society, scholars were at the top of the status hierarchy and merchants near the bottom. Today, scholars have become merchants in order to support the academic enterprise. The worry, of course, is the risk of going too far in responding to market demands. Where does one draw the line? Both campus and government officials worry that traditional academic values are being marginalized in the relentless pursuit of money.

### *Academic Reforms*

New interdisciplinary programs are being created on campuses to address specific opportunities, from environmental engineering to international business, and to counteract the narrowness of many traditional programs. Key universities also are encouraged to become more comprehensive. Formerly specialized universities can now branch out into new fields that perhaps may be more attractive and lucrative than their original missions.

Many campuses are creating general education programs, and some are even allowing students to enroll without declaring a major at the outset. Universities offer a long list of general education courses designed to encourage creativity and critical inquiry. Unfortunately, the examination system still puts a premium on memorization, so students who have opportunities for a broader education may have formed their intellects by rote rather than innovative thinking.

Many academic reforms parallel American higher education. It's almost as if some university leaders are saying, "The United States has the best higher education system in the world so let's adopt American models." The danger is that programs that work well in one culture may be a mistake in another.

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### *Structural Reforms*

Many Chinese universities have gone from an organizational system in which all departments reported to an academic vice president, to one in which schools and colleges have been instituted to put decision making closer to the individuals involved. Chief academic officers on those campuses must be ecstatic to have fewer direct reports, although the additional structural layer increases the bureaucracy at a time when institutions are seeking greater efficiency.

One emerging change is the development of a credit system. Since transfer is virtually unheard of in Chinese higher education, the credit system gives students greater flexibility in their degree programs. They can graduate whenever they have the proper number and arrangement of credits rather than following a lockstep curriculum. Combined with the lifting of the age limit of 25 years for enrollment, the credit system makes Chinese universities more open to older and part-time students.

### *The Question of Autonomy*

The degree of flexibility seems to vary from one campus to the next, from one week to the next. We are seeing a hybrid system with both old and new elements. Key universities must raise most of their own money, but the central government controls enrollments and tuition levels, thus determining the income stream from student resources. Similarly, the number of faculty members in each program is determined centrally, so the expense side is also out of the hands of campus decision makers. What's more, the Ministry of Education assigns individual students to universities and majors. Certainly there is discussion between ministry and campus officials, but the final say comes from the center.

Individual campuses can create their own curricula, but any new concentrations must be on the Ministry of Education's list of 248 approved majors. In fact, many reforms occur within previously approved programs because a new track can be determined at the campus level while a new program must go to government authorities. Some universities, however, are part of experimental efforts that allow them to make more decisions unilaterally.

### *Observations*

It is a time of great opportunity as well as substantial uncertainty. The Ministry of Education creates study groups to recommend good practices in both curricular and managerial

arenas; savvy academic administrators "touch base" regularly, with the result that reforms look quite similar across campuses. But Chinese politics are hard to predict so what is permissible today may not be tomorrow—and vice versa. The government clearly believes it is devolving authority, but universities do not always feel that they have increased power. Ministry officials are also uneasy about the dangers of institutions using their autonomy to chase after profits rather than enhance academic quality. In addition, even if top officials support reforms, bureaucrats within the ministry might remain engaged in areas that have technically been delegated.

We are seeing a pragmatic trial-and-error method for university reform, with rapid adoption of successful experiments across the nation. One scholar described it as *mo shi guo he*—groping for stones while crossing the river. Another remarked that this is a unique moment in which everything is in flux, but five years hence the relationship between government and campus may become codified. The pace of change, and the opportunity for change, may diminish.

In most policy systems, authority once devolved is hard to take back. With any luck, Chinese university reform will nourish an intellectually vibrant and internationally competitive higher education system. ■

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## News of the Center and the Program in Higher Education

Editorial work on *The Past and Future of Asian Universities*, edited by Philip G. Altbach and Toru Umakoshi, is mostly complete. The Johns Hopkins University Press will publish this volume, which features essays on 12 Asian countries and was funded by the Toyota Foundation and the Japan Foundation. The Center's women's higher education initiative continues. Graduate assistants Francesca Purcell and Robin Helms are currently completing collection of data for our questionnaire on women's universities worldwide. We plan additional activities as well. For the past seven years, the CIHE has hosted the editorial office of the *Review of Higher Education*, one of the main journals in the field of higher education. The *RHE* is edited by Philip G. Altbach, with BC professors Karen Arnold and Ted Youn serving as associate editors. Roberta Bassett is the managing editor. Our term of editorship ends in January 2004, and the editorial office will move to the University of Houston, with Amury Nora as editor. The journal's publisher is the Johns Hopkins University Press.

Our bibliography on private higher education in international perspective is also nearing completion. This project is cosponsored with the Program on Research in Private Higher Education (PROPHE) at the University at Albany. Alma Maldonado-Maldonado is the coordinator of this project at CIHE, assisted by Hong Zhu. We expect to publish a book based on this bibliography by the end of 2003. PROPHE will continue the project with a website and additional research. CIHE and PROPHE copublished Glenda Kruss and Andre Kraak's edited volume, *A Contested Good? Understanding Private Higher Education in South Africa* in July as a contribution to international awareness of the growing phenomenon of private higher education. This book was distributed to several hundred key readers worldwide. It is available, from the CIHE, without cost to colleagues in developing countries.