

### CHINA NEEDS ITS OWN STANDARDS TO MEASURE UNIVERSITY SUCCESS

All this may reflect significant improvement at individual universities, but not necessarily for the system as a whole. In other words, a number of individual Chinese universities climbing to top ranking positions is one story, and the Chinese system as a global leader is another. Put explicitly, individual universities can hardly make a game changer, but a university model may. It is important to note that the success of Western systems in global comparisons leveraged not only the performance of individual universities, but also (and more importantly) the strength of a normative model. The British university model featured the notion of liberal education; the German model advanced the idea of research for the sake of creating knowledge; and the US model combined both of these and highlighted the university's role of social service.

---

**...China's State Council officially promulgated a blueprint that explicitly and exclusively spells out details as to China's world-class university ambition, including a timetable.**

---

Then, how might a new Chinese higher education system be defined? The new blueprint requires top universities to pursue world-class standing, while developing "Chinese characteristics." With this added ambiguity, China will need to develop its own standards for the world-class university endeavor, which support both a global role for Chinese universities and cultural distinctiveness. Whether there is a Chinese or Confucian model of the university now is debatable, but Chinese universities, with unprecedented support from a strong state, indeed reflect a distinctiveness that is different from their Western peers. For instance, Chinese universities seek to articulate strategic planning with national and local development agendas, and address national and local needs. This type of politicized social engagement often absorbs considerable resources, be they human or material. The current global rankings are not able to measure these contributions and, as a result, the contributions of Chinese universities to social and economic development are systematically underestimated and undervalued. Furthermore, since lifting the restrictions on study abroad and (literally) encouraging it some 30 years ago, China has suffered from a huge brain drain, which now hovers at an estimate of over three million Chinese knowledge workers

residing abroad. Yet in recent years, Chinese universities began to benefit from the process of brain circulation.

Arguably, there is no other system with such an ambitious national agenda for academic development and competitiveness, especially over such an extended time span. There is essentially no international indicator that captures the significance of this agenda or timeline. China's success may be significant, but not necessarily in the way that will move its universities into more competitive positions in the current global rankings. The government's intentions reflect quite different agendas at the same time, and would benefit from explicit "Chinese standards" to help establish a clearer direction for higher education development in the country. ■

---

## Chinese Higher Education: "Glass Ceiling" and "Feet of Clay"

PHILIP G. ALTBACH

*Philip G. Altbach is research professor and founding director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. E-mail: altbach@bc.edu.*

China's impressive higher education accomplishments have masked some significant barriers to the ascent of Chinese universities to the top rungs of global academe, as well as some significant problems at the bottom of the system. Key structural problems create a "glass ceiling" that may affect further improvements in the international rankings. This discussion follows Rui Yang's "Toxic Academic Culture in East Asia," an insightful analysis in the Winter (2016) issue of *International Higher Education*, that emphasized some deep challenges facing universities in the region, from corruption to influence peddling in academic appointments.

The focus in China has been on a small but important number of research universities, mainly the institutions that are part of the well-known 985 and 211 programs, that pumped billions of US dollars into a limited number of top Chinese universities. Without any doubt, this investment has created significant research capacity and world-class infrastructure at these top universities, and will probably yield impressive results in the coming decades. Yet, mainland China has only two universities in the top 200 of the *Times Higher Education* global rankings—compared to three for

tiny Hong Kong, technically part of China but with a quite different academic culture.

#### **“GLASS CEILING” AND “FEET OF CLAY”**

What do we mean by “glass ceiling” and “feet of clay”? A “glass ceiling” refers to a set of conditions that may inhibit Chinese universities from reaching the top of the global rankings, and more importantly, from achieving their full potential for excellence in research and teaching.

By “feet of clay” we mean that China has developed an unbalanced higher education system. The top universities have been generously funded and many can now compete with the best global institutions. The same cannot be said for the many smaller universities, applied (polytechnic) universities, or colleges that have absorbed the huge numbers of students that have entered the system in the past two decades. (China now has the largest enrollments in the world.) Most of the “demand-absorbing” public, and a growing number of private institutions at the bottom of the system, are underfunded and generally offer rather poor quality. Many have criticized this situation, and have pointed out that many of the graduates of these institutions are ill-prepared for the labor force and, subsequently, cannot find jobs.

---

**While China’s top 100 universities have made significant progress, the pressures of massification continue to affect the institutions at the bottom of the system.**

---

It is not enough to have a small number of high-quality, elite universities. Successful higher education systems offer reasonable quality at all levels, and ensure that all students receive the preparation necessary to successfully enter the labor force. China needs a system that incorporates diversity to accommodate a range of students and institutional missions with adequate support for all. China is not alone in its discrepancies between the different levels of higher education, but the “feet of clay” at the bottom of the academic hierarchy in China creates serious problems for the system as a whole.

#### **OVER-BUREAUCRATIZATION AND NARROW THINKING**

Several telling examples illustrate Chinese thinking about higher education. Government regulations require that an area of study should be defined as a traditional discipline

if it is to obtain legitimacy within a university and receive appropriate support. Of course, in the 21st century, interdisciplinary pursuit is increasingly important and it makes no sense to define academic study narrowly. This will only serve to limit innovation and scientific creativity. The following example illustrates the contortions required of Chinese scholars to make things fit into “appropriate” structures and bureaucratic ways of thinking. One well-known Chinese university must defend “higher education studies” as a “discipline,” so that its institute of higher education can achieve recognition, hire faculty, and offer academic degrees. In fact, higher education is an interdisciplinary field incorporating insights and methodologies from a range of social science disciplines, and is not, in any way, a traditional discipline. Research and teaching on higher education is conducted at that institute, but some flexibility and “21st century thinking” would make life easier and open better opportunities for scholarship. Of late, Chinese authorities have begun to support some interdisciplinary initiatives at some top universities, so perhaps this bodes well for the future.

Another less than useful policy stipulates that in order for a university department or institute to make tenured (permanent) appointments to faculty, the academic unit must teach undergraduates. Internationally, it is not uncommon for departments or other academic units not to teach undergraduates in order to pursue a mission focused on graduate education or research—yet they retain the authority to make faculty appointments and offer promotions. In China, where the tenure system is slowly evolving at some top universities, rigid and, often, counter-productive rules are still being imposed.

Historically, the Chinese system has combined the worst of all worlds—almost all faculty and staff contracts were renewed automatically without a serious evaluation of performance, while at the same time, without guarantees of academic freedom or other protections. While rigorous evaluation of faculty is increasingly common at the top of the system, in general there is little, if any, measurement of research or teaching productivity elsewhere, allowing mediocrity to flourish in the rest of the system.

#### **FUTURE TRENDS**

Many Western, and Chinese, observers insist that Chinese universities are poised to join the very top ranks of global universities very soon. The realities noted here, as well as other challenges such as the ongoing impediments to academic freedom, difficulties in developing an academic culture free of plagiarism, and boosting academic salaries, will hinder China’s climb to the top. Further, and just as important, the deep and generally overlooked problems at the bottom of China’s academic system have created significant

inequalities, with universities at the bottom suffering from underfunding and producing questionable quality. Many of these universities are being converted into polytechnic institutes (“applied universities”), which may contribute to the creation of a more rational system of higher education in China. While China’s top 100 universities have made significant progress, the pressures of massification continue to affect the institutions at the bottom of the system.

When predicting the future of Chinese higher education, it is important to recognize the reality of the system as a whole and not be mesmerized by the rapid and impressive achievements of China’s top universities. Lurking within the system are deep problems that have yet to be addressed—let alone solved—and that are fundamental to the health of the higher education system in the long run. ■

---



---

## Managing Markets and Massification of Higher Education in India

**N.V. VARGHESE**

*N.V. Varghese is director, Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education, National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi 110016, India. E-mail: nv.varghese@nuepa.org.*

The higher education system in India is at a stage of revival. The sector experienced an unprecedented expansion in this century. The double-digit annual growth rate in the previous decade helped the higher education sector enter a stage of massification. With more than 700 universities, nearly 37,000 colleges, 1.4 million teachers, and 31 million students, Indian higher education is a massive system, the second largest in the world after China.

### MARKET-FRIENDLY REFORMS

The massification of the sector reflects a change in public policy, from a state controlled, publicly funded system that experienced slow growth and provided limited access, to a system led by market principles of operation. Liberalization policies in the economic sector in the 1990s encouraged a permeation of market forces and market-friendly reforms into the higher education sector, which led to a proliferation of private institutions and the explosion of student enrollments in India.

It may seem strange that while mature market economies relied on public institutions to absorb the massive demand for higher education, less developed market economies such as India relied on the market. At present, more than three-fifths of the enrollment is accounted for by private higher education institutions.

---

**Market-led massification promoted a faster growth of market-friendly study programs in technical, professional, and management domains, leading to disciplinary distortions.**

---

Initially, private sector involvement in higher education was in the form of sharing costs with the government. The next phase saw the emergence of self-financing and capitation (special fees that student pay at some colleges prior to entry) fee colleges, followed by private institutions attaining the status of deemed-to-be universities (a special status that state authorities can give to universities not otherwise officially recognized), and finally the status of private universities in this century.

### MASSIFICATION AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Market-led massification promoted a faster growth of market-friendly study programs in technical, professional, and management domains, leading to disciplinary distortions. This resulted also in an increase in the unemployment of graduates from these streams, leading to a decline in the demand for these study programs and the closure of some private institutions.

Massification promoted the expansion of non-university institutions and study programs awarding diploma level certifications. The non-university segment has been the fastest growing segment in higher education—the enrollment increased by 23 times, and its share in total enrollment by eight times, between 2005 and 2012.

Higher education in India is mainly undergraduate education, which accounts for nearly 80 percent of the enrollment. The share of enrollment in graduate study programs is low and that in research programs is declining. This trend may have implications on the availability of teachers, constraining the sector even further.

### MASSIFICATION AND INEQUALITIES

The massification of higher education in India is accompanied by persisting, if not widening, inequalities. While