

# China's Opportunity: Recommendations for Liberal Arts Innovation

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Liberal arts and science education in China is at a pivotal moment. In the last decade, Mainland China and Hong Kong have witnessed significant growth in university programs that emphasize liberal education, a holistic education philosophy that prepares lifelong learners with broad, integrated knowledge and a sense of social responsibility. That growth has happened both within Chinese higher education and as part of new joint ventures between Chinese and Western universities. It is a stark contrast to the traditional, utilitarian Chinese curricula that focus more narrowly on developing students for a singular profession.

China and Hong Kong are not alone among countries interested in leveraging liberal arts and sciences (LAS) education to advance a twenty-first century workforce and economy. Over 200 programs, the majority founded in the last twenty years, now exist outside the United States. Yet, despite its long history in US liberal arts colleges and public universities, LAS faces significant scrutiny as critics there question its value and contend that a more practical, career-oriented approach is needed.

At this ironic juncture, China faces serious challenges to LAS reform, as well as a significant opportunity. In June 2017, twenty-five university leaders and scholars from Canada, Hong Kong, Mainland China, Singapore, and the United States met at Duke Kunshan University (DKU) in Jiangsu Province to examine obstacles and opportunities for LAS. In addition to the recommendations below, they concluded that if China can expand its LAS programs in innovative and culturally relevant ways, it is poised to influence LAS education beyond its borders.

## GOALS AND OBSTACLES

China's motivation for developing LAS education draws on its deep cultural traditions. This local grounding is crucial for China to fuel an innovation economy and cultivate graduates with a sense of vocational and community purpose. Many of the attributes of LAS education are not new ideas in China. As the world's oldest continuous civilization, China has deep philosophical traditions, which focus on character development and mastering knowledge content, practices closely aligned with the holistic goals of an LAS education.

China, however, faces significant obstacles to reform. These obstacles include misunderstandings about the meaning of LAS; doubts about its value and relevance; the low quality and restricted access of current offerings; a lack of qualified faculty; formal metrics and incentives that hamper educational innovation; the need for teaching about traditions beyond Chinese ideologies; and the fact that Mainland Chinese institutions are overseen by important political forces that are ambivalent about the virtues of LAS education. Of immediate concern, in the last year, the Chinese government increased restrictions on public expression and course content while escalating university monitoring and censorship, actions that can significantly impede LAS progress.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While we are not in a position to suggest political or ideological changes to the structures that govern Chinese universities, our work culminates in six key recommendations to overcome obstacles and to realize the potential for LAS in China.

- **Make general education matter:** In recent years, Chinese universities have reformed and expanded their general education offerings to enable students to study outside of their major. While an important step forward, many general education courses are of low quality. They are regarded by students as superfluous and by faculty as low status work. To develop broadly educated, creative thinkers for an innovative economy, a relentless focus on improving the quality of these courses is necessary.
- **Invest in interdisciplinary integration:** Beyond general education, the future demands problem solving that can only be achieved through integrated, interdisciplinary solutions. Although general education provides a multidisciplinary curriculum, it typically lacks the integration of a truly interdisciplinary LAS education. Several experimental programs such as Fudan University's Undergraduate Upgrade 2020 Plan, Peking University's Yuanpei College, Tsinghua's Xinya College, and Lingnan University in Hong Kong, as well as new joint ventures like Duke Kunshan University, suggest

the promise of this approach. Yet these programs are available only to a small number of students at elite institutions. To reach its potential as a global LAS leader, we recommend that China nurture these ventures and invest in additional programs that will facilitate experimentation and broader access.

- **Focus on faculty incentives and development:** In order to achieve LAS learning outcomes, a renewed approach to teaching is required. Empirical research illustrates that learning by rote listening and memorization without interpretation or critical evaluation, still common practice in Chinese universities, is inadequate for developing creative and critical thinkers. It is not enough, however, to call for new classroom approaches. Mobilizing faculty to teach differently requires incentives for advancing teaching quality and that faculty development be given strategic priority alongside research and publication demands.

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- **Embrace innovative pedagogy:** A focus on pedagogy involves greater attention to the ways in which students learn. This means mobilizing faculty to decide together what they want graduates to be able to do and fostering a shared commitment to achieving these outcomes. It further demands a broader, pedagogy-focused institutional culture that experiments with new strategies and that purposefully integrates cocurricular activities as a central means for developing students' aptitude for adaptability, problem solving, and team work.
- **Scale quality programs:** LAS reform is only worth undertaking if it is developed with an intentional dedication to quality and continuous improvement. At the same time, China has a rare opportunity to scale crucial LAS innovations as it introduces those innovations, an opportunity not available in the United States. Key factors in going to scale include leveraging new technology and developing new paradigms for quality teaching, both of which require significant investment, extensive experimentation, and careful evaluation. If it wants to achieve a broadly innovative, entrepreneurial economy and community-minded citizenry, China will need to prioritize student access to LAS opportunities.
- **Study multiple traditions:** To succeed anywhere, LAS reforms must be relevant to both local and global con-

versations and conditions. This imperative offers important opportunities to advance conversation among Chinese, Western, and other cultures, to explore various knowledge contributions, and to view them in the context of worldwide debates and dilemmas. While grounding a curriculum in national traditions, placing Chinese perspectives in dialogue with views from Indian, Islamic, Western, and other cultures is crucial to the students' personal and intellectual development as well as their ability to engage successfully in a global society.

These recommendations are intended for collective and internal consideration in China. They should be considered comprehensively, not individually, as an integrated part of a holistic education philosophy. But from a global perspective, China is especially well situated to show other countries new ways to meld LAS philosophy with pre-professional education; methods to develop a truly interdisciplinary, integrated education (blending across disciplines and curricular/cocurricular boundaries); and the means to produce innovative pedagogical practices that ensure quality and access. Yet none of these LAS strategies is obtainable without an open academic dialogue that incorporates a variety of historical and cultural perspectives. While there is recent evidence suggesting greater experimentation in compulsory ideological courses, there is also evidence that the central government has escalated its oversight of content and curricula. Teaching various interpretations and the multitude of traditions within China's own complex history, as well as those outside its borders, is a crucial step and a valuable way for China to take the lead among other LAS experiments where academic content is tightly controlled. ■

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## The New National Rankings in India

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**A**lthough world university rankings cover only a small share of higher education institutions, their results at-