

## China's higher education system: current situation and development trends\*

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### Abstract

This article presents an overview of the reforms that led to the creation and establishment of a comprehensive higher education system in China, which reversed the elitist character of university access in China since the late 1990s and into the present century. Reforms allowed university students to enjoy growing freedom of searching for knowledge, education and employment. Higher education becomes a platform from which the various talents of graduates are distributed, and the *status* of these latter is determined by their demonstrated capabilities in both society and the labor market. However, the large number of university graduates following the massification of higher education brought about a pressure on the labor market, creating a certain discrepancy between the structure of education and that of the production sectors.

**Keywords:** China, market reforms, higher education system, higher education massification.

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**T**o transform China, an immense and the most populous country in the world, into a strong nation as regards human resources constitutes a strategic issue that is incumbent not only on the State, but also on the academia and the society.

From 1977, when the university entrance exam was reintroduced in China, until the end of the 20th century, higher education in the country was under the centralized administration of the State and enrollment was fundamentally formed by the elite of the country. Afterwards, as a result of a broad process of economic reforms and opening policies established in the country and of the opportunities provided by the accelerated development of information technologies, there has been a significant expansion in admission of students to educational institutions, and the structure of education as a whole underwent profound changes.

More than that, the higher education reforms that aimed to ensure that the growing number of people enrolled in the country's top universities get good jobs and, consequently, better quality of life, have also changed the needs of individuals concerning education.

To ensure the implementation of reforms and the expected development of the country, the Chinese government adopted national strategies that take into account both the country's reality and conditions and experiences of other nations. As to the massification of higher education, China chose a path of development based on qualifications and has been building a system capable of, simultaneously, satisfying the needs of individuals and adapting to the country's social development project.

This article presents an overview of the reforms that led to the creation and establishment of a comprehensive higher education system in China. One that reversed the elitist character of university access in China since the late 1990s and into the present century.

## **REFORMS: CREATION AND ESTABLISHMENT OF A HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM FOCUSED ON THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT**

The desired massification of higher education in China was built through a continuous process of administrative decentralization and adjustments begun in 1998. Throughout this process, the Chinese government expanded student recruitment, merged universities, and implemented tuition fees. This radical reform of higher education has laid a firm foundation both for the socioeconomic development of the country and for the strengthening and improvement of higher education in China.

### **Two-level governance: partnership between the central and the provincial governments, an administrative system that prioritizes local management**

By the end of the twentieth century, as the country's political structure was reformed, and the bodies of the State Council reorganized, the country restructured, merged and decentralized a number of higher education institutions that were, until then, run by different sectors and departments of the central government and the provinces. Thereupon the "fragmentation" that characterized the higher education system has been changed, giving rise to the present two-dimensional administrative system characterized by a partnership between the central government and the provincial administrations, the latter ones holding the preference in the management of the institutions.

These changes in the administrative system of higher education institutions produced significant rearrangements and led to a remarkable advance of higher education in the country. In 1998, nine departments of the Ministry of Industry and Mechanics were closed and merged, leading to adjustments in the hierarchical relationships of its 91 Regular Higher Education Institutions (RHEIs) and 72 Higher Education Institutions for Adults (AHEIs)<sup>1</sup>. In the first half of 1999,

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<sup>1</sup> AHEIs are institutions that generally provide night courses or distance learning aimed at people delayed in schooling and who is already working. (Translator's note).

25 RHEIs and 34 AHEIs subordinate to the five areas of the military corporation – artillery, aviation, aerospace, shipbuilding, and nuclear industry – had their administrative system restructured. In the first semester of 2000, the administrative system of 161 RHEIs and 97 AHEIs subordinate to the 49 departments of the Ministry of Railways of the State Council was adjusted.

As a result of this restructuring process, the 367 RHEIs subordinate to 62 ministries were reduced to approximately 120 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) under ten ministries. Seventy-one out of these 120 are directly subordinate to the Ministry of Education and about fifty of them to other ministries. In addition to these, China also has 896 other RHEIs that are subordinate to the local administration or whose main administrator is the prefecture (Ma, 2013). Such adjustments also triggered activism in defense of local development of higher education, which underwent a rather significant advancement.

Currently, more than 95% of the RHEIs are local. More than a hundred out of them are institutes and colleges that provide undergraduate courses, and about four hundred are vocational colleges, sponsored and financially supported by municipal governments. These local HEIs receive a large influx of people who are in the age proper to attend university, and are therefore participants in the growing massification of higher education. Thus, an administrative system of higher education has been built, which meets both the conditions of the Chinese government and the world standard of higher education development.

In order to accelerate the reforms of the administrative system, especially in light of the new demands resulting from the country's transformations towards the market economy, the government has gradually extended the process of decentralization, requiring the fulfillment of an educational path that corresponds to the established standard. These changes are also observed in the documents that set up the national policy, in the legislation and in the norms established in the latter thirty years.

In October 2012, the Ministry of Education published the Classification of Undergraduate Programs in Regular Higher Education Institutions and the Administrative Regulation for the Implementation of Undergraduate Courses in RHEIs, both of which were based on the revision of the 1998 version of the

classification. In comparison with those of 1998, the regulation of 2012 stand out for expanding local autonomy in the implementation of undergraduate courses at HEIs, which are established under supervision and control of the central government, as well as for the incentive to internal organization of HEIs in accordance with legislation.

The issue of the new index entailed the decentralization of the government departments responsible for education, in conformity with the State's goal to achieve a new standard of development in education. It also furthered the construction of a basis for the autonomy of educational organization by the HEIs and the increasing competition among them.

### **Coexistence of elite and mass higher education and public and private systems**

Since the establishment of New China in 1949, the country has followed two paths of development for higher education. On the one hand, it has gradually improved the categories of HEI courses, according to the economic and social needs of the country. Multidisciplinary universities and polytechnic schools were created, as well as institutes and schools of agriculture and forestry, water resources and electric power, medicine and pharmacy, languages, economics and finance, physical education and arts, among others. On the other hand, the country adopted a layered educational organization comprising several academic levels, and a strategy aimed at building a world-class higher education, which was implemented in top level universities of both 211 Project<sup>2</sup> and 985 Project<sup>3</sup>; in HEIs directly subordinate to central ministries, such as the universities of Tsinghua and Beijing; in HEIs authorized to grant doctoral and master's degrees; in colleges; in vocational technical colleges, among others.

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<sup>2</sup> Project 211, officially launched in 1995, is aimed at strengthening 100 specific HEIs and some key areas of study. (Translator's note)

<sup>3</sup> Project 985, launched in 1999, is aimed at changing China's top universities into world-class research institutions by the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century, and includes about 40 HEI out of those participants in Project 211 (Translator's note)

In April 2012, the country launched the Project for Higher Education Innovative Capacity Improvement Scheme, generally known as 211 Project, which aimed to accelerate the consolidation of high-quality universities, as well as to foster the proliferation and distinction of the better institutions. This project also planned a path of development directed towards professional differentiation, services, technological innovation and appliance.

Although the country's higher education system has been largely public, the number of private institutions has increased significantly following the promulgation, in August 1993, of the *Provisional Regulations on Establishment Criteria for Private Educational Institutions*. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education for years 1997 to 2002 (China, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002), private RHEIs increased from 20 to 131; in 2010, they counted 676; and reached 698, in 2011 (China, 2010, 2011). Such growth made private institutions an important complement to public higher education. Together, public and private institutions comprise structure in which elite and popular higher education coexist.

### **Priority for national examination results in admission policy and supplementary special recruitment**

As already mentioned, since the beginning of reforms and opening policies, China reintroduced the national entrance examination to higher education (*gaokao*) as the primary admission mechanism. Although being considered relatively fair, impartial and objective, *gaokao* has some limitations that have been counterbalanced by the Chinese government through pilot reforms intended to broaden the autonomy of HEIs in recruiting students.

In the most prestigious universities, candidates who participate in other recruitment schemes are still required to pass the national exam and, when approved, they are entitled to twenty points or other benefits in the final mark of their exam. Particularly in the universities of Fudan and Shanghai Jiao Tong, recruited students also must pass the *gaokao*. However, as they are pre-approved students, the grade of their examination has just a consultative and reference

character. After being pre-approved and signing a contract with one of the universities approved to operate this form of recruitment, candidates are deemed automatically waiving the vacancies in other HEIs. Finally, in vocational training HEIs such as those in Beijing, Shanghai and Hebei, candidates approved in the selection exams of each institution do not need to do the *gaokao*.

In addition to the institutions covered by the three reform pilot projects mentioned above, a further 68 RHEIs carried out their own recruitment in 2008, and 76 RHEIs, in 2010. The analysis of total admissions of students at Zhejiang, Beijing, Wuhan Polytechnic universities and Huazhong University of Science and Technology, for example, shows that a relatively large number of students – between eight hundred and 1.3 thousand students – was admitted to these universities through their own recruitment processes.

The expansion and improvement of students recruitment policies in higher education has also resulted in a greater diversification of university students' backgrounds and, consequently, in greater equality in access to higher education.

### **A unified system for students financial assistance: tuition fees and waivers, scholarships, grants, loans, work-study programs**

Between 1977 and 1989, higher education in China was fully public and free, and the State conducted coordinated systems of national entrance exams and of job placement for newly graduated university students. Afterwards, the government introduced two policy measures that changed the system of full State responsibility for higher education. Tuition fees were introduced and the system of job placement for newly graduated university students ceased to exist. Since the introduction of these changes, officially promulgated in 1993, a system of shared responsibility for educational finance is now in place in the country, in which the government sets the standards for recruitment and admission systems and for tuition fees charge.

In 1997, the implementation of the higher education national entrance examination, the autonomous recruitment by some educational institutions, and

the tuition fees charge for university students according to a national standard of values was completed in almost all HEIs.

According to statistics (China, 2000, 2005), the national average academic fee in 2000 was RMB 4.5 thousand (about US\$ 544) per year. For undergraduate courses in the areas of humanities, the average fee was RMB 4.2 thousand (about US\$ 507); in the scientific areas, the average was RMB 4 thousand (about US\$ 483); and for foreign languages and arts, RMB 5 thousand (about US\$ 604). After the turn of the century, the average fee stabilized between RMB 4.5 thousand and RMB 6 thousand (about US\$ 725) in the regions of stable development and between RMB 3 thousand (about US\$ 362) and RMB 4 thousand in the underdeveloped, with small adjustments in the case of certain disciplines.

At the same time, considering the income disparity prevailing among Chinese families and aiming to reduce problems related to education costs for students from low-income families, the People's Bank of China, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance set in motion a national costs and aid policy for subsidizing the poorest university students. This policy was extensively implemented as of 2000.

However, with the expansion of HEIs recruitment, the difficulties of poor students in getting access to higher education became increasingly evident. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education (China, 2009), in 2009, 23.06% of the 22.9 million people enrolled in RHEIs faced financial difficulties and 1.7 million, or the equivalent of 7.27% of the total, were considered very poor. Seeking to cope with this problem, the government has allocated substantial financial resources to prevent poor students from losing the opportunity to access higher education for being unable to afford the costs. By the end of 2011 the student financial aid system set up by the government reached 2,121 regions and municipalities in the 27 provinces where it was developed. The grants are awarded according to the place of birth of the student.

The government financial aid system comprises grants that are awarded in the form of scholarships, tuition discounts and exemption, subsidized loans and



work-study programs. Some universities, as for example Tsinghua, also apply other aid programs, such as grants awarded by own institution and *alumni* donations that set a “Green Path System” for low income students who are entering university.

Until April 2011, the Tsinghua University awarded more than 325 different kinds of scholarships out of these *alumni* donations. This kind of peer support among university students, which does not require compensation, has not only solved many problems regarding both the admission of poor candidates into the university and the costs of their studies, but has also strengthened relationships among students.

In addition, it is important to highlight that many HEIs, by means of work-study programs, have contributed to the independence of students, to a greater awareness of their responsibilities and to improve their ability to work. The initiatives above mentioned have not only helped to effectively cope with the impasse over economic inequalities in the education system, but also, in some way, to promote social harmony and stability.

### **Autonomous choice of market-oriented employment and change in profile of university students**

Higher education is a fundamental factor in social stratification and social mobility. This can be observed, in the case of higher education massification in China, in the changing profile of university students, as well as in their possibilities of employment.

Between 1977 and 1988, as China needed a large number of technical and management professionals, the State chose to take responsibility for financing the majority of HEI students and for the homogeneous allocation of jobs among students. University students were, then, considered qualified and skilled, trained to offer great contributions to society.

By attending higher education, university students acquired the professional status of managers, which allowed them, especially those coming from a rural background, to move to the urban *hukou*<sup>4</sup> and, thus, to ascend in the social scale, obtaining the "iron bowl"<sup>5</sup> as public officials.

Alongside the deepening of economic reforms and opening policies – especially after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 "Southern Tour Speech" – China has initiated a series of policy reforms, such as the unified allocation of job placements to graduates and the national entrance examination for admission to higher education. As of 1993, the State ceased to allocate jobs and the choice began to fall to the graduates themselves, the HEIs being responsible only for directing them to the market. The university elite of the 1980s, which developed at the expense of the government, changed from 1999 on, when higher education began to increase recruitment within a community of students able to pay tuition fees and choose their profession autonomously.

Throughout this process, university students enjoy growing freedom of searching for knowledge, education and employment. Higher education becomes a platform from which the various talents of graduates are distributed, and the *status* of these latter is determined by their demonstrated capabilities in both society and the labor market. Some scholars call this new design as "mass" or "post-elite" higher education system.

However, the large number of university graduates that followed the massification of higher education brought about a pressure on the labor market, creating a certain discrepancy between the structure of education and that of the production sectors, thereby jeopardizing the communication fluency between them. The service sector, which by its very nature is capable of absorbing highly qualified talents, has not shown adequate development so that to embrace the large number of newly graduated students.

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<sup>4</sup> *Hukou* is a Chinese system of household registration that identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes identifying information such as name, parents, spouse, and date of birth (Translator's note).

<sup>5</sup> The "iron bowl" is a metaphor for a stable job. Chinese people often use to hold a bowl from which they have their meals. If the bowl is made of iron, it will not break. Holding an "iron bowl" in the labor market means that people will not lose their jobs. (Translator's note)

In addition, the still-existing segment of people who, stuck to traditional thinking, want to be under the protection of the system and earn a living with the “iron bowl”, i.e., working as a public official, produces a serious imbalance between the number of university graduates and the vacancies available, a disassociation between the job placement and university training, to the point that the income of university graduate can be lower than that of peasants.

It is also worth to emphasize, in view of this broad process of expansion of recruitment in Chinese higher education, that economic reforms and reorganization, social benefits and employment policies are important initiatives towards the efficacy of higher education in a country of so diverse population and realities.



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