

# CHAPTER 4

## The Evolution and Missions of Universities in China

*Jianhua Lin*

### THE EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

**T**he past four decades have witnessed three major development phases of higher education in China.

- **Phase 1: 1980s** — recovery period. During this period, the national entrance examination for college studies was resumed and universities returned to normal operation, after more than ten chaotic years. In spite of the poor conditions back then and the longtime isolation from academic frontiers, faculty members and students were eager to learn everything new and they were all highly motivated for research and studies.
- **Phase 2: 1990s.** China was transforming to a market economy, with an orderly market yet to be put in place. It was a difficult time for Chinese universities. Scholars were confused and lost between pure academic careers and the reality of survival. University education suffered a heavy blow as teachers wanted to do business, students sought to go abroad and many universities began to set up companies for profits.
- **Phase 3: Since the end of 1990s,** China has been more confident for its development path and future directions, enjoying rapid social and economic development and a stable international political landscape. On the occasion of Peking University's centenary in 1998, the central government of China put forward the vision of building world-class universities, which marked an important turning point of higher education in China. Since then, higher education in China has entered a fast-developing stage.

The past two decades have seen drastic changes in China's higher education.

- The **first** change is the merger and expansion of universities. Through mergers, comprehensive universities came into shape. And the expansion and building of new branch campuses have been strongly supported by the central and local governments. Currently, the number of College students has grown from 875,000 in 1978 to 37 million, with the gross enrolment rate reaching 42%, enabling wider access to higher education.
- **Secondly**, efforts have been made to implement the plan of building world-class universities for enhanced competitiveness. The "Project 985", a project by the Chinese government, was launched in May 1998 to provide special support for the development of some major universities. Plans have been formulated at both national and university levels to attract top-notch talents, and science and technology investment has been increased to improve infrastructure and to enhance academic competitiveness.
- **Thirdly**, more inputs have been contributed to education reform. The resources for education in China have maintained continued growth and the input in 2012 reached 4% of GDP. Universities were encouraged to actively explore ways for education reform and enhance the qualification of talents.
- **Fourthly**, reform of management systems has been advanced to set up a modern university system. Extensive exchanges on managements have been carried out between universities from both home and abroad so as to draw on the governance experience of developed countries. In addition, universities have drafted their constitutions for governance in accordance with laws and regulations.

The past two decades have witnessed rapid development and much progress in China's higher education. Yet overall, the development of universities in China still follows an extensive model, as evidenced by more focus on immediate development instead of long-term strategic layout, more attention on academic research and less improvement in education, more input for infrastructure and less progress in institutional building. Obviously, such a model is not sustainable and that's why we need to step up the building of systems and mechanisms and enrich the underlying core values of universities.

## THE COMPREHENSIVE REFORM OF CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

From the perspective of serving a county and the public, higher education shoulders two responsibilities:

- **Firstly**, enhancing the quality of higher education so as to provide stronger intellectual and academic support for social and economic development; Secondly, promoting equal opportunities for education and, in particular, focusing more attention on western China and poor families, so as to promote upward social mobility through access to higher education.
- To **further** boost the development of higher education, the central government has taken measures to facilitate the comprehensive reform of universities. On one hand, efforts have been made to streamline government administration and delegate power, reduce administrative interventions and mobilize the initiatives of universities. On the other hand, universities have been encouraged to speed up comprehensive reform and institutional building for more efficient operation. In this context, the central government has designated Peking University, Tsinghua University and Shanghai Municipality as pilot project bases.

For comprehensive reform, efforts are being made to formulate integrated plans based on the analysis of various development bottlenecks and institutional constraints, and to resolve problems in a phased manner. The aim is to unleash the potential for creativity of both organizations and individuals, enhance the utilization of resources, and realize the missions and development goals of universities. Therefore, we should identify, first and foremost, the missions and tasks.

The mission of Peking University is to nurture individuals who lead the future, and to develop new thoughts, to frontier science and future technology. Built on that, our university should serve national development and social progress, which represent effective ways to pool social resources and enhance our core competitiveness. Comprehensive reform will centre on the university's core mission, identify bottlenecks for development and seek solutions.

In this connection, Peking University's plan for comprehensive reform includes the following four aspects: education reform, personnel system reform, reform of the governance system as well as of the system of resource allocation.

- **Education reform** holds the key for comprehensive reform, and it aims to develop a talent cultivation system which combines both

specialized and general education. The reform of specialized education focuses on making cultivation plans more diverse and providing more options for students; whereas the reform of general education emphasizes efforts to enable students to have a deeper and genuine understanding of themselves, of society, of China and of the world. To keep a sound balance between teaching and research, and mobilize teachers' initiatives is a challenge facing all research universities, yet the situations are more severe for universities in China. In this regard, we have provided students the space to change majors within the same faculty and the freedom to choose university-wide optional courses. We also linked resources allocation of schools and colleges with teaching/learning, and steered more focus towards teaching and students. Meanwhile, we have launched reforms of teaching methodologies and performance assessment systems.

- The purpose of **personnel system reform** is to foster a sound institutional and cultural atmosphere. During the past decade, to attract top-notch scholars, we have put in place tenure track and annual salary systems, contributing to notable enhancement in competitiveness of Peking University. However, this has also led to a problem with current parallel implementation of both “old” and “new” systems. Therefore, the key to personnel system reform lies in reforming recruitment, compensation and promotion systems of faculty members. Since 2014, the new recruits have all been covered by the tenure track system. In 2016, Peking University adjusted its compensation system, increased benefits for faculty members and conducted tenure assessment for faculty members under the old system so as to facilitate their transition to the new system.
- **Reform of the governance system** mainly involves the academic governance system and the administration system. The goal of the academic governance system is to enable scholars to participate more in academic issues and even play a dominant role. In the past, Peking University practised a “university-schools/departments” two-tier management, which tilted more towards administration. Now we have implemented a “university-faculty-schools/departments” three-tier management, strengthening academic management as the directors of various faculties will be scholars. Currently, Peking University has six faculties in total: humanities, social sciences, economics and management, science, engineering, and medicine, shaping a more rational management structure. At the same time, measures have been taken to develop various types of committees consisting of scholars, especially the set-up of an academic planning committee to oversee the adjustment of academic structure. The focus of

administration system reform is to give schools/departments more autonomy. Moreover, Peking University is planning to make its management team more professional and more service-oriented so as to provide facilities for academic activities and convenience for faculty members and students.

- **Resource allocation** is an important means for universities to adjust the interests of various parties. At Peking University, the resource allocation still mainly follows the principle of centralized management. We will phase in the practice of budgetary management by faculties and schools/departments, and form a more open and sustainable management model.

## DEVELOPMENT TREND OF CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

The survival, development and progress of a nation depend on its capacity for innovation; whereas education serves as a bridge for the future as it enlightens people's mind. In a country with as large a population as China's, the abundant human resources will only turn into an advantage with high-quality education. To further deepen reform of higher education and improve education quality, China has introduced a series of new plans and measures, and universities are also stepping up with internal building for addressing future challenges.

One of the major measures is a new plan for "building world-class universities and disciplines", which will soon be put into practice. The new plan has several features: firstly, more focus on education and talent cultivation; secondly, introducing third-party evaluation and competition to break rigidity for dynamic adjustment of extra investment; thirdly, stress on Chinese characteristics to solve China's issues based on national conditions and enhance the international standing of Chinese universities; fourthly, attention to regional layout and special national demands. In addition, the input for the plan this time will see a large rise, twice the amount of the last round of plan, i.e. 100 billion RMB to be provided in the next five years.

Furthermore, the Chinese government has also rolled out new policies for higher education, including streamlining administration, delegating more power to various localities and universities and optimizing services. Covering a wide range of areas such as major setting, personnel system, compensation system, the use of research funds and governance of universities, the new policies are significant in developing modern university systems, removing institutional barriers for higher education development, further unleashing the creativity of universities and scholars, and enhancing the overall competitiveness of China's higher education.

The input for education and science and technology are on a continuous rise. According to the 13th Five Year Plan, the Chinese government and the public will further increase science and technology input, develop major science projects and infrastructure, and strengthen support for scientific research; build national laboratories to increase academic and research capacities that can better serve national strategies in fields of priorities; and education expenditure of 4% of GDP will be maintained to further enhance the quality and level of basic and higher education.

In the information era, education needs to make the best of information technology and promote sharing of high-quality education resources. In this regard, Peking University is leading a nation-wide alliance for sharing on-line credit courses and working together with Wisdomtree, an education service company. Last year, we offered 265 MOOC courses on the platform of treenity.com, with over 1,700 universities joining in course-sharing and 6.5 million students choosing credit courses through the network. The co-sharing of high-quality education resources has particularly helped universities in western China to enhance their teaching quality, thus effectively contributing to equity of education.

What makes a great university with Chinese characteristics is a fundamental issue and a profound challenge for Chinese universities. Modern universities were all originated from and based on western culture. Eastern countries and nations, in spite of their time-honoured history and glorious civilizations, failed to breed higher education in the modern context. In addition to those elements (such as academic excellence, good governance...) requested for a great modern university, an ideal Chinese university of world class shall be deep-rooted in Chinese culture and civilizations and able to tackle China's problems based on its own national conditions. This makes Chinese universities with Chinese characteristics. We are not going back to the old times or old-style schools. Instead, we are trying to explore ways to develop new types of universities in China.

I think, in the drastically changing world today, eastern wisdom may provide us with a unique perspective to observe the world. Eastern culture shall be an inclusive and organic system combining traditional Chinese culture, science and rational culture of the western world, Marxism as well as China's practice. This is actually how Chinese culture has evolved over thousands of years. Likewise, China's universities in the future shall also absorb the essence of all kinds of great cultures and build into world-class universities with Chinese characteristics in a genuine manner.