

Higher Education in China, 2050:

Moving to High-Quality Popularized Higher Education

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In 1973, American sociologist Martin Trow presented his report titled *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education* at the Conference on Future Structures of Post-secondary Education held by the World Economic Cooperation and Development Organization (OECD). His report proposed a three-phase model of higher education development for the first time and used the gross enrollment rate of higher education as an indicator to measure the expansion scale of a certain country's higher education system as well as divide its development stages.

According to his argument, the elite stage of higher education development means that the gross enrollment rate is less than 15%, while the massification stage means that the gross enrollment rate is greater than 15% and less than 50%. When the gross enrollment rate is greater than 50%, a higher education system can be regarded as entering the stage of popularization.

Since mainland China implemented the "Reform and Opening" policy in the early 1980s, after more than 40 years of rapid development, China's higher education has not only achieved the goals of massification and popularization in 2002 and 2019, respectively, but also achieved a transformation from scale expansion to quality improvement.

According to China's present socioeconomic development trends and long-term plan *China Education Modernization 2035*, it seems appropriate to anticipate that China's higher education will enter a new stage of high-quality popularization in 2050, which means a further improvement of higher education penetration rate, quality and equity. A more open higher education system with further optimized structure will be established.

Increase in the penetration rate of higher education

The high-quality higher education popularization first means a higher gross enrollment rate. Along with the continuous development and transformation of

China's economy and society, especially the arrival of the wave of college-age youth in the "post one-child policy era", higher education will continue to be popularized in China. According to data released by UNESCO in 2018, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in developed countries has reached an average of over 80% (<https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2018/12-13/8701371.shtml>).

According to the current gross enrollment rate of higher education in developed countries around the world, it seems that the scale of China's higher education still has a lot of room for development in the next 30 years. By 2050, China's higher education gross enrollment rate will reach a higher level, and perhaps will approach or even exceed some developed countries. Factors including population ageing and declining birthrate may contribute to this trend to a certain extent. As the birthplace of standardized examinations, ancient China has a long history of imperial civil service examinations. No matter how the penetration rate of higher education increases, the college entrance examination will still be the most important way for Chinese higher education institutions to recruit students in the foreseeable future. Taking test scores as an important criterion in the process of admissions has become a major feature of higher education in East Asian countries that is different from Western countries.

Improvement in China's higher education quality

Quality is the lifeline of higher education, and high-quality development is an important dimension of the popularization of higher education. According to the *National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)* issued by the State Council in 2010, the policy of *China Education Modernization 2035* issued in 2018, as well as other series of national-level policies for guiding the development of higher education, further improving the quality is an important goal of China's higher education reform and development in the future.

Based on the historical experience of developed countries, it seems obvious that after a certain higher education system enters the phase of popularization, it will perhaps undergo significant changes in terms of admission opportunities, institutional scales, intuitional diversity and teaching reform. One of the greatest change might be that receiving higher education is no longer the privilege of a few people but has become a choice for most people.

The major goal of providing higher education services will be to prepare the entire population for future life. Therefore, in the next 30 years, China will inevitably improve the overall quality of higher education via optimizing its structure and

diversification in order to meet most Chinese people's demands. Moreover, students' choices will be more rational. Fulfilling the needs of individual development will become the major motivation for entering universities. In the coming era of artificial intelligence, higher education in China will also be more diverse and flexible.

Enhancement of higher education equity

From a global perspective, improving education equity is always a major approach to promote social equity. Promoting higher education equity is therefore a common task faced by all countries around the world. For a long time, due to various historical, geographical, economic, and cultural factors, higher education in China has always had problems of regional imbalance and inequality between urban and rural areas. For instance, in terms of the distribution of high-quality higher education resources, there are 25 (69.4%) prestigious "Double First-Class" universities in China's eastern region, while in the central and western regions, there are only 5 (13.9%) and 6 (16.7%), respectively. Meanwhile (2017), the population proportions of the central and western regions are 26.5% and 27.1%, respectively.

The Chinese government has already attached great importance to these issues and has implemented various policy interventions, such as attempting to get provinces and the Ministry of Education to jointly provide support for the development of universities in less-developed regions, and giving priority to admit ethnic minority students and students from the middle and western regions as well as rural areas. Along with the equalization of the allocation of higher education resources and the entrance opportunities, it seems appropriate to anticipate that the higher education equity will be further improved in China, shifting from the pursuit of formal fairness to the pursuit of substantive equity.

Promote a more developed higher education system

A more developed or mature higher education system means that it can cultivate different kinds of talent to meet the needs of a country's socioeconomic development. As the world's largest developing country under the continuous promotion of "Reform and Opening Up" development strategies, China's economy and society will face comprehensive and profound transformations in the next 30 years, which include the transformations in the fields of agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, service industry, technology, culture, and education. Such transformations will bring new challenges to universities in the dimensions of talent training, conducting research, providing social services, as well as disseminating traditional culture.

In order to deal with such challenges, higher education in China needs to

undergo serious transformations in terms of the major educational goals, the methods of major/program settings, as well as the models and methods of talent training. high-level research universities (e.g., China's "Double First-Class" universities), local-level institutions which specifically serves local economic and social development, as well as higher education level vocational colleges which serves the modernization of manufacturing all need to optimize their respective development models for achieving functional complementarity.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to anticipate that China's higher education system will become more diversified in types (and levels), more appropriate in its overall structure, and more comprehensive in its functions while entering the relatively mature stage of higher education popularization in 2050. And some universities in China will grow up as the top-level or high-level universities in the world.

Construct a more open higher education pattern

Opening to the outside world is not only an important symbol of higher education internationalization but also a crucial part of China's "Opening Up" national strategy. Since the 1980s (when "Opening Up" became a fundamental national strategy), international higher education exchanges and cooperation, as well as higher education level student mobility have become important pathways for China to achieve "Opening Up". According to statistics published by China's Ministry of Education, in 2017, a total of 489,200 foreign students, including 75,800 master and doctoral students, from 204 countries and regions studied in 935 Chinese universities in 31 provincial level regions. This number has increased by 18.62% compared to 2016, making China the largest destination country for studying abroad in Asia (http://www.xinhuanet.com/local/2018-03/30/c_1122614769.htm). In the post-epidemic era, the internationalization of higher education will be further developed via online communication.

By 2050, it seems also appropriate to anticipate that China's higher education system will be more open and inclusive. In addition to the expansion of the scale of higher education internationalization, China will also focus on improving the quality of internationalization process to further promote cultural exchanges and talent mobility between countries/regions around the world, untimely in order to enhance international understanding and friendship, and contribute to constructing a better community of shared future for mankind.