



China's Academic Excellence Initiatives

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Abstract

China is often cited as a classic example of successful academic excellence initiatives featured by a prominent role of the government. Their next stage of development needs to explore new models to support innovation and sustainability in higher education.

Since the mid-1990s, China has invested a lot in higher education, specifically targeting a highly selective group of universities. Major initiatives in this field include Project 211 in 1995, Project 985 in 1999, and the ongoing Double First-Class University Plan launched in 2015. Their aim is to elevate China's best universities to world-class level with global reach and impact. As part of Project 211, 112 universities were selected and received the total equivalent of USD 2.7 billion from the central government. Project 985 handpicked 39 universities with a commitment of USD 7.97 billion. The Double First-Class University Plan included 137 universities and 465 disciplines in its first round, and over USD 14.14 billion was spent from 2018 to 2020.

The lists of universities participating in these initiatives overlap to a large extent. Since 1995, the Chinese government has invested nearly USD 25 billion in these projects, focusing especially on national flagship universities. Provincial governments have always been urged to match funds for participating universities within their jurisdictions. The overall public expenditure would therefore easily exceed USD 42 billion if provincial inputs are taken into account, thus making this arguably the world's largest investment into higher education.

World-Class Status Achieved?

Scholars are divided on whether the aforementioned initiatives have managed to uplift China's best universities to world-class levels or not. In 2021, the ministry of education (MOE) officially started evaluating the first round of the Double First-Class Plan. Prior to this, each participating university was required to carry out both a review by external experts and a self-assessment. Based on the assessments, several universities, including Tsinghua University, declared that they had reached world-class status. While such a claim is supported by their rising in major global university rankings, it provoked widespread skepticism. In a subsequent press conference, the MOE emphasized that overall, there was still a large gap between Chinese universities and global world-class HEIs.

The return on investment is especially clear in terms of quantifiable and measurable performance indicators, as evidently seen in global rankings. China is the only country to have been leaping forward substantially and consecutively for years in nearly all rankings. Mainland China currently has 71 universities in the top 500 and eight in the top 100 in the 2022 Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), compared to only nine in the top 500 in 2023, when Tsinghua University ranked highest at 201–250. Seven and six mainland universities have reached the top 100 in the latest *Times* and QS rankings respectively, with Tsinghua University and Peking University considered among the top 20.

In China, global rankings are used as a synonym for world-class universities and the benchmark for development. Chinese universities do well in terms of the key performance indicators of the rankings that focus primarily on comparable research outputs. In 2018, China became the world's largest producer of scholarly papers, thus dethroning the US, and became the most cited country among the top 10 percent of scientific and technical papers cited worldwide. China and the United States accounted for 24.8 percent and 22.9 percent of the top 10 percent of cited scientific and technical papers worldwide respectively. In 2019, 1.67 percent of scientific articles with Chinese authors were in the top 1 percent of the most cited articles, compared with 1.62 percent of articles with US authors. China also leads in patent applications with 40 percent of the world's total.

Governing Higher Education through Academic Excellence Initiatives

Usually called “key construction projects,” China’s academic excellence initiatives (AEIs) have always been project-based. Free from conventional bureaucratic approach to fiscal expenditure, such a practice effectively enables the government to distribute funding flexibly and unevenly, creating strong incentives for selected institutions. Centered on clearly defined tasks, the projects are tailor-made to implement particular policy goals with strategic priorities at different stages. Though different projects are managed differently, all participating institutions translate state intentions into specific tasks. They are carefully monitored and assessed. The Double First-Class Plan had introduced a merit-based and outcome-oriented competition mechanism, in which underperforming universities would be disqualified from the list, while high-performing ones would be added during the next round. The list is adjusted every five years.

China’s AEIs show the typically Chinese ways of policy making and project implementation: top-down, state-led, catch-up mentality, concentration of resources where needed aiming at quick effects, and campaign-style governance with relatively short-term focuses. Such inbuilt features raise questions about the sustainability of such projects and underlying challenges. First of all, such initiatives have significantly transformed university practices and academic culture. In order to win funding and gain reputation associated with the initiatives, universities reorganize themselves to meet project requirements measured by simplified performance indicators of global rankings and government-led evaluation. Corporate-style management tools, including performance-based appraisal system and direct financial rewards for research publications, are adopted to boost productivity. Academic culture is increasingly imbued with utilitarianism and short-termism.

Secondly, China’s AEIs have contributed to inequality in an increasingly unbalanced higher education system. While participating universities have been continuously receiving generous project money, many nonparticipating institutions suffer from shortage of funds, with widening gaps between them in teaching and research. The disparities between developed and underdeveloped regions are also prominent because the selected universities concentrate in major cosmopolitan and coastal areas. Such uneven distribution of government funding pushes universities of different levels and categories to compete intensively to be included in the initiatives. They tend to take guidance from the KPIs of world-class universities, which leads to the erosion of systemic and institutional differentiation, as well as relevance to local society.

Thirdly, despite China’s rise as a scientific power, its humanities and social sciences have been greatly overshadowed by STEM-related disciplines, with little progress and low international visibility. The gap is partially generated by the AEIs’s inherent bias toward natural and technological sciences, which are favored for their perceived direct contribution to social and economic development. An overwhelming majority of endeavors to gain world-class status at institutional level have focused on STEM disciplines exclusively because they produce more publications and citations that weight heavily in global rankings and national evaluation exercises. Similar gaps exist between fundamental and applied research.

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Conclusion

China is arguably the most extraordinary case of academic excellence initiatives in the world. The example of China is appealing to various nations aiming to create world-class universities and a modernized higher education system. With substantial and consistent financial support, Chinese initiatives have greatly influenced the country's premier universities and have stimulated them to change their frame of reference so that they embrace international norms and compete on the global stage. Although China's achievements have been largely quantitative so far and sometimes even imitative, they pave the way for the next, qualitative stage.

China's AEIs have also raised concerns. The higher education reform needs to be continued in order to find a nuanced balance between a powerful state and a vigorous academic system. The traditional top-down approach that has long worked well might not be as effective in the future. Deep cultural changes are necessary to create an environment that would support innovation and sustainability in higher education. Meanwhile, evidence shows that certain efforts have already been made to explore new models of higher education development. ▲