

# The Direction of Change in Chinese Higher Education from a Global Perspective

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**Abstract:** At present, with the increasing popularization of higher education around the world, there is an urgent need for developing countries to meet the needs of national and social development by elevating the level of higher education. The study found that there is a need to analyze the rationale of Chinese higher education as well as its future direction of change based on a global perspective within the context and historical evolution of higher education. The development of higher education is also characterized by a lack of independence and bureaucracy, and the problems are analysed in the specific discipline of pedagogy. The study suggests a direction of change, mainly in terms of ideology, management system and the use of new technologies, so as to provide a realistic theoretical basis for the development of higher education in China.

**Keywords:** Global Perspectives; Higher Education; Rationality; Direction of change

## 1. Introduction

As the wave of globalization continues to advance, countries around the world are interacting with each other to a certain extent in various fields, including politics, economics and culture. Education is the foundation of a nation's development. Among other things, higher education is crucial to the development of our country. At this critical historical point of time, China must accelerate the construction of a high-quality higher education system and solidly promote the innovative development of higher education. In this process, not only can effectively promote the development of scientific research, but also train more professionals, providing a strong guarantee for the construction of China. However, there are still some problems in the development of higher education in China, which greatly affect the advancement of higher education in China and hinder the development of society even more. Therefore, in the context of the era of globalization, we need to stand in a broad perspective to see where the direction of change in China's higher education is.

## 2. Higher education context analysis

After an era of elitism, global higher education moved towards vulgarisation and popularization in the second half of the 20th century, both in terms of the size of education and gross enrollment rates. The United States, which was the first to enter the stage of popularization of higher education, saw its gross enrolment rate exceed 50 per cent in 1975. By the twenty-first century, universal access to higher education has become a major trend in the development of higher education worldwide. At the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, UNESCO recognized that expanding access to higher education and increasing enrolment rates in higher education were urgent priorities. To this end, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) has published Widening Access to Higher Education to safeguard access to higher education for low-income families.<sup>[1]</sup> In order to promote the popularization of higher education, China has issued relevant policy documents, setting out clear requirements for the popularization rate of higher education. As of 2021, China's gross enrollment rate in higher education has reached 57.8%. Both developed and developing countries are moving towards popularization of higher education.

However, in the process of the development of higher education towards popularization, more prominent problems have also emerged: the uneven development of higher education among countries. Economically advanced countries have more developed higher education systems, while developing countries are lagging behind. In terms of the quality of higher education, the gap between developed and developing countries is large. Therefore, addressing how to promote higher education in

developing countries to catch up with the pace of developed countries, that is to say, the balanced development of higher education in the world has become a problem that needs to be addressed.<sup>[2]</sup> In fact, both developed and developing countries are in the community of human destiny, and higher education does not exist in the higher education pattern of a single country, but under the global political and economic pattern, which concerns the common interests of mankind.<sup>[3]</sup> Therefore, it is urgent to study how to promote the balanced development of higher education in the world based on a global perspective, with a view to narrowing the gap between regions and countries and promoting the relative fairness of the development of higher education in the world, so as to achieve the common development of mankind.

### **3. Historical evolution of higher education**

#### ***3.1. The Evolution of Western Higher Education***

##### ***3.1.1. Ancient Greek and Roman times***

Educational activities at that time were concentrated in two types of educational institutions: specialized schools and other educational establishments. Specialized schools such as court schools, vocational schools, priestly schools, and temple schools. Different schools trained different individuals, some to train state rulers, some to train general officials, and some to train senior monks or professionals. Ancient Greece, on the other hand, is one of the major origins of higher education, where Greek philosophy and science began to flourish in the 4th and 5th centuries B.C., with the rise of the city-state polity. In Athens, schools of a specialized nature emerged: schools of rhetoric, founded by the School of Pointing, which centered their teaching around the three arts; and schools of philosophy, founded by philosophers, such as the academy founded by Plato, which provided young scholars with the opportunity to study philosophy, science, politics, and ethics in depth. Other educational places such as museums and monasteries are venues where people can engage in educational activities.

##### ***3.1.2. Medieval Europe to mid-twentieth century***

This period of development was closely linked to Christianity and began to be dominated by education in Christian theology. And the schools of rhetoric and philosophical education of the classical era gradually declined. This phase saw the emergence of independent forms of institutionalized organizations, which further contributed to the process of modernization in Western countries. Initially, scholars organized themselves and there were no geographical restriction, allowing scholars from various geographical areas to engage in academic learning. Among them, religious institutions played a major role in higher education during that period, and church schools and monasteries became the places to train priests, monks, and cultural elites, with a strong theological coloring. By 1939, universities had become educational institutions throughout Europe, whereas at the beginning of the 19th century, as a legacy of the early modern tradition of the Middle Ages, they were confined to parts of the continent, mainly in the west and south.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### ***3.2. The evolution of higher education in the East***

Higher education in the East begins with the Arab Empire. Higher education in the Arab empire was fairly well developed, with a large number of schools. There are as many as 238 universities or "madrasahs" with names and as many as 60 without names.<sup>[5]</sup> As a large empire spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe, countless scholars gathered here, and many schools of higher learning were established mainly here. The establishment of European universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was greatly influenced by Arab higher education during this period.

Although the study of Chinese higher education as a specialized research field started in the late 1970s, as early as the end of the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, some scholars had already conducted preliminary research and thinking on certain issues of higher education, producing a number of results with certain practical significance and theoretical level, which have played a certain role in the development of Chinese higher education in modern times.<sup>[6]</sup> During the period of the Republic of China, the form of higher education was initially visible in China, and its institutional system was gradually moving towards perfection. China at that time extensively absorbed and borrowed from Western higher education systems and ideas, and put them into the field of practice. The development of higher education in the Republic of China was a miracle in the history of Chinese education, and the large number of young intellectuals created during this period brought hope for the development of

education, social change, political and cultural prosperity in many fields. Throughout the characteristics of higher education in the Republican period, it is not only the product of social change, but also the result of the sublimation of patriotism of the people.<sup>[7]</sup>

The development of higher education in the East and the West is similar to a certain extent, and it is its long historical evolution that compels us to pay close attention to the connection between the East and the West and even all the countries in the world nowadays, and to explore the development of higher education in the new era from a global perspective.

#### **4. Rationalization of Higher Education in China**

##### ***4.1. Rationalization of higher education***

Logical structure of subject knowledge in higher education, the basis for the division of subjects in individual faculties. In recent times, the organizational shape of higher education can be seen in terms of the body of knowledge. Based on the emergence of different specializations in different disciplines, different approaches and methods are proposed from different fields, and most of them end up carrying intellectual innovations in the form of papers. Today's higher education perceives the world in this way, with a trained, formatted approach to teaching and learning. Confined to a framework, it has become a shackle on people's thinking, forgetting that education should return to life itself.

##### ***4.2. Status and Problems of Higher Education in China***

Over time, the content and organization of higher education have changed dramatically, and the modern trend has been towards the popularization of higher education, with countries establishing their own university systems. In China, higher education still has problems with the management system. In terms of both the lack of independence and the high level of bureaucratization, the academic independence and freedom of higher education are often interfered with by external forces, and its internal bureaucratic phenomenon also hinders the long-term development of higher education. It's also very common that most students don't start learning a semester's worth of course content until the end of the semester. And this so-called "learning" is only the knowledge of rote memorization of the test points and knowledge, and then pass the examination of the course. It didn't take long for the exams to end and what was learned faded with time. The end result is that students often don't learn much after four years, and there is absolutely no way to connect the theoretical knowledge they learn with real life. These so-called questions really come down to a fundamental question, which is what is the learning of theoretical knowledge? Let's go back to that original point together. The series of questions raised by this point of origin, which we often bring to the fore with great fanfare, do not help to solve the fundamental problem.

Next let us analyze the problems of higher education through the discipline of pedagogy.

##### ***4.2.1. Differences between pedagogical and practical theories***

The categorical and differentiated development of disciplines has long been the main way in which disciplinary knowledge has grown. However, after the World War II and especially since the twenty-first century, the way in which knowledge grows has changed profoundly, and so has pedagogy.<sup>[8]</sup> Taking the subject of education as an example, there is often confusion about the theoretical study of education: Do you actually apply the theories you have learned in your educational internship practice? The answer is often no. Because the theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom is very different from the theory needed in reality, in the process of classroom teaching, we tend to develop an in-depth study around some definitions, to understand the history of the theory, the development of the origin, the evolution of the process, and so on. In actual teaching practice, what we then need is how to design a lesson rationally, from preparing to delivering a lesson, which requires not the same theory as the theory learned.

##### ***4.2.2. Challenges to pedagogy***

Pedagogy faces many challenges today, with some scholars questioning the discipline as immature and others arguing that the discipline should not be offered at the undergraduate level and so on. All these voices lead us to a very real question: how should pedagogy be changed?

#### **4.2.3. What to study in education**

In fact education, as social life itself, is characterized by geography, age, gender, etc., and educational activities are in fact directly and should be life itself. Education should change according to geographic location, change with age, and so on. From this we grow towards upward mobility and education towards social development, fostering the ideal society of the future.

#### **4.2.4. Revolutionary factors in pedagogy**

First, the level of social development is a crucial factor. An example of this is the problem of regional development disparities, where there are significant differences in the level of education between the central and coastal regions, and between developed and underdeveloped regions, which need to be regulated as well as the level of modernization. Second, the need for zeitgeist cannot be ignored. Through qualitative research, we understand how the creation of knowledge, such as the theoretical study of internationalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, which was learned through such a "Western" model, is now needed to create the spirit of the times that belongs to China itself in the new era. In addition, it is important that research experience continues to be gained. Through the integration of the various types, ultimately limited to self-fulfillment, but the study does not lie in the path, but in the care received as well as in the social life that contains the inherent specificity of the prescriptive nature of education itself.

The pedagogy cited above is only a category of higher education, and the problems it reflects do not include all the problems that exist in our higher education, but they also reflect, to a certain extent, the problems in higher education that we cannot ignore.

### **5. The Direction of Change in Chinese Higher Education**

Changes in higher education are part of social change, but at the same time independent. In recent times, the legitimacy of its existence has been under attack, and society itself has moved towards post-modernization, in other words, industrialization towards digitalization. Now that the development of higher education has come to a new and critical point in time. Faced with a series of difficulties and challenges, let us can not be confined to the small perspective of self-development to see its changes, but should take a global perspective to find out where Chinese higher education should go.

#### **5.1. Historical Changes in the University**

The university has undergone two profound changes since its birth in the 12th century. At the beginning of the 19th century, Wilhelm von Humboldt founded the Humboldt University in Berlin and put forward the concept of scientific research above all, and outside the training of talents, the research of disciplines has become an important function of the university, which is a major adjustment of the university to adapt to the development of industrialization on the demand for scientific research. Into the 20th century, especially after World War II, the U.S. higher education sector put forward the Wisconsin Idea, expanding a new function for the university: to serve the community, which is a major change made by the university to adapt to the needs of mass and socialization.<sup>[9]</sup> Today, we need a panoramic view of its underlying logic. At the surface level, the independence of higher education itself is under attack, and higher education itself is constantly interacting with society and is closely linked to social life. At bottom, the production of knowledge has changed, and higher education is now increasingly at the service of our scientific, technological and economic production. Knowledge is rigorously oriented towards real-world problem solving, and requires synergy between multiple subjects and a wide range of scopes.

#### **5.2. National Formation Scenario**

In the historical trend of the development of globalization, a concept is often mentioned: the global village. In our country, it is even more important to develop higher education by focusing on the openness of higher education itself. Different ways of constructing knowledge in some disciplines, especially in the sciences, the need for changes in the way knowledge is produced in the world as a whole as a means of solving real problems, the introduction of organizational skills as a new indicator of social life, the modernization of the management of higher education institutions, and so on. The vision can no longer be limited to the development of a single country, but must take a long-term view of the educational development process of the entire human race, emphasizing synergies between

developed and developing countries. Just as the entire planet is one country, the differences imply the need for different modes of management and an organic unity among the different states of development.

### **5.3. Pathways to Direction of Change**

#### **5.3.1. Change of mindset**

Change in higher education requires first and foremost a change in mindset, which is very difficult. Countries are developing more and more closely, coupled with the rapid development of the Internet, artificial intelligence and big data, people's mindset can no longer just stay at the original stage. This requires that every college and university teacher also have a global perspective that is well integrated into the classroom. In this context, it is necessary to accelerate the change of people's mindset to better realize the change of China's higher education.

#### **5.3.2. Improvement of the management system**

Accelerating the improvement of the management system of higher education in China and enhancing the independence and autonomy of higher education institutions. Academic freedom in higher education should be adequately safeguarded, both in terms of the freedom of faculty to conduct academic research and the freedom of university students to explore academic truths should be widely supported and safeguarded. Moreover, higher education institutions should reduce their dependence on the state's politics and economy and become a relatively independent system, effectively balancing the state's supervision of institutions of higher education and the independence of institutions of higher education themselves, so as to achieve a harmonious state, thereby promoting the development and progress of higher education.

#### **5.3.3. Learning to apply new technologies and methods**

Learning and mastering new technologies about Internet technology, big data technology, artificial intelligence, modern algorithms, etc. is a big trend, and teachers play a key role in higher education, so in the context of globalization, teachers need to learn more comprehensively, especially about the use of new technologies. Massive online teaching and learning became the norm some time ago, and since then, online teaching and learning, which seemed out of reach a couple of decades ago, is now not uncommon. This reflects the need for teachers to learn more about new technologies and to utilize them in their teaching practice. The wave of revolution in higher education triggered by rapidly iterating information technology, especially artificial intelligence, has arrived. Education in the age of industrialization and education in the age of informationization are two different times and contexts, and the historical mission entrusted to teachers is also different.

## **6. Conclusions**

In the flood of globalization, we need to stand in a larger and broader perspective to find the direction of China's higher education development. It has its own unique development needs, based on China's national conditions and the current stage of development planning, but also in line with the tide of the times, responding to the call of the era of the community of human destiny, cultivating talents, and contributing to the development of the society, the strength of the country, and even the progress of the world to contribute to a share of China's wisdom and China's power. Let us find the position and mission of Chinese higher education in the global development of higher education and accomplish a new metamorphosis and growth.

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