

From Traditional Growth to Sustainable Development: 20 Years of Higher Education in China (1999–2019)

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the characteristics and trends in China's higher education development from traditional growth and expansion to sustainable development from 1999 to 2019. Sustainable development of higher education is a realistic and rational choice in China's future. China's higher education has experienced traditional development from extension to integration, which provides the foundation for sustainable development of China's higher education. After 20 years of development, China's higher education has gained remarkable achievements in scale expansion and program construction. The process of sustainable development of higher education in China shows the need to adapt to the necessities of society and the masses, which serve as the driving force of the government. In effect, the process optimises the allocation of educational resources, meets the needs of people and society, and adheres to the standards of program development and quality improvement and drawing upon the lessons from the development of higher education in other countries.

Keywords: higher education; historical change; traditional growth; sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development can be traced back to the global conservation program jointly published by IUCN, UNEP and WWF in 1980. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published the report, 'Our Common Future'. This report formally uses the concept of sustainable development and offers a more systematic exposition that had a wide ranging effect even on educational systems worldwide.

We are currently facing huge global problems, such as the refugee crisis, global climate change, extreme poverty and illiteracy, which can be solved through universal education and international cooperation. Higher education not only plays a vital role in this respect but also a leading role. China's higher education development has undergone a profound transformation from an extensional development characterised by scale expansion to a sustainable development that focused on improving quality development (Xiao, 2018).

DISCUSSION

1999–2005: TRADITIONAL GROWTH STAGE MARKED BY LARGE-SCALE ENROLMENT

In 1998, the gross enrolment rate in China's higher education was 9.76%, which translates to 7.8 million students (Dunrong & Deguang, 2009). A huge gap was noted as compared with the

average level of development of higher education in the world at the time. According to the statistics of UNESCO, in 1998, the gross enrolment rate of the world's school-age youth in higher education was 18.18%, 40.12% in developed countries, and 14.11% in developing countries (Zuoxi, 2001). The development level of China's higher education is much lower than that in developed countries, and the average level for developing countries is much farther from the huge demand for higher education.

A group of experts and scholars have been actively promoting the reformation and enrolment expansion of higher education since 1998. The learning rate increased to about 15% in 2010. In 1999, the third national education work conference held subsequently, the Party Central Committee and the State Council officially announced that 'the enrolment scale of colleges and universities will be greatly expanded' and encouraged local governments and colleges and universities to actively expand the enrolment scale. During the meeting, the National Development and Planning Commission together with the Ministry of Education jointly issued the emergency notice on expanding the enrolment scale of higher education in 1999 in the form of urgent internal documents. China's higher education expanded the enrolment rate to 331,000 students from 230,000 at the beginning of the year. In 1999, the actual number of college enrolment increased from 1.08 million in 1998 to 1.597 million, indicating an increase of 517,000 or 47.36%. The number of students in schools increased by 760,000 or 22% over the previous year. The gross enrolment rate in higher education reached 10.5% or 0.7 percentage points higher than the previous year (Binglin & Xinfeng, 2019).

As a result, China's higher education has shown the emerging trend of higher education development, which placed the country back on the track of sustainable development and started the seven-year expansion plan. The period from 1999–2001 represented the greatest development in higher education in China since the reform and opening up of the economy. The number of enrolments and students in school doubled in three years. By 2002, China's general colleges and universities had enrolled 3.25 million, and 16 million students, respectively. The gross enrolment rate of higher education increased from 9.8% in 1998 to 15%, and historically marked the popularisation of higher education in China (Baocheng, 2009).

2006–2011: DEVELOPMENT STAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION WITH QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AT THE CORE

On May 10, 2006, the executive meeting of the State Council proposed that higher education should fully implement the scientific outlook on development, control the growth of the enrolment rate, relatively stabilise the scale of higher education, focus on improving quality, and strive to cultivate students' sense of social responsibility, practical ability, and creative spirit.

CONTROL THE GROWTH RATE OF ENROLMENT AND STABILISE THE SCALE OF ENROLMENT

Since 2006, the growth rate of higher education enrolment has declined significantly. In 2006, 5.461 million students enrolled in colleges, indicating an increase of 355,000 over the previous year, with a year-on-year decrease of 5.7 percentage points. Compared with the seven years of large-scale enrolment expansion, the growth of the scale of higher education decreased by 8.5 million from 2006 to 2012, with a growth rate of 38.6%, while the growth of enrolment in colleges decreased by 2.118 million, with a growth rate of 53.5%. The growth of the number of college students decreased by 3.92 million, with a growth rate of 32%. Since 2006, the growth trend in the total scale of higher education and the number of college students in China has slowed down, especially in the number of college students, which showed less increase in 2011 and 2012, with 190,000 and 73,000, respectively, while the average added value of

enrolment from 1998 to 2005 was 565,900. The growth of enrolment rate in colleges and universities has been effectively controlled, the goal of macro-control has been achieved, and a buffer opportunity has been achieved for higher education.

STRENGTHEN THE REFORM OF EDUCATION AND TEACHING AND IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF PERSONNEL TRAINING

In December 2004, the Ministry of Education held the second national undergraduate teaching conference. They shared several opinions on ‘Further Strengthening Undergraduate Teaching in Colleges and Universities’ by emphasising that institutions must adhere to the scientific development concept, establish the basic understanding that quality is the lifeline of colleges and universities, and underscore quality in a more prominent position. Since the launching of the ‘Undergraduate Teaching Quality Project’, carrying out a series of ‘Excellence Plans’ and adjusting the ‘Professional Catalogue’, higher education institutions have been exploring the reformation of the talent training mode to improve the quality of education and teaching. Among these programmes, the launch of the ‘undergraduate teaching quality project’ is of great significance to the improvement of the quality of personnel training in higher education.

At the beginning of 2007, the Ministry of Education further deepened the reforms in undergraduate teaching by improving the quality of teaching. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance launched the implementation of the ‘Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project’ in colleges and universities. ‘Quality Engineering’ is a major undergraduate teaching reform project approved by the State Council and implemented by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance. It represents the full implementation of the strategic deployment of the Party Central Committee and the State Council with focus on improving the quality of higher education. It is a major measure to deepen the undergraduate teaching reform and improve teaching quality.

IMPROVE THE ABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO INNOVATE IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE, AND
SERVE THE BUILDING OF AN INNOVATIVE COUNTRY

With the completion of the popularisation process, China has become a veritable country of higher education, but the problem of ‘big-but-not-strong’ has become more prominent. By 2012, there are more than 2,400 colleges and universities, but not many colleges and universities could make it to the world’s list of top universities. An urgent problem is improving the scientific and technological innovation ability of higher education and enhance the international competitiveness and international academic reputation of Chinese universities.

Based on the continuous implementation of the ‘211 Project’, the ‘985 Project’ and the ‘University Philosophy and Social Science Prosperity Plan’ in 2012, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the ‘Opinions on the implementation of the innovation ability improvement plan of colleges and universities’, i.e. the ‘2011’ plan. This plan is the third strategic plan reflecting the initiatives of the state in the field of higher education in China. It aims to break through the internal and external institutional barriers of institutions of higher learning, implement the vitality of innovative elements, such as talents and resources, deepen the institutional reform of institutions of higher learning, enhance the innovation ability of institutions of higher learning and promote the development of the social economy.

However, with the economic and social development and the improvement of the popularisation of higher education, the shortage of high-quality higher education resources has become the main issue at this stage, which has led to a series of difficult challenges that has earned considerable concern from society, such as the equity of higher education, the quality of personnel training, the employment of college students, and the independent administration of colleges and universities.

2012–2019: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STAGE

In November 2012, the report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed that institutions should promote the development of higher education and further clarify and emphasise the ‘connotative development’ orientation of the national higher education policy. Under the guidance of this policy, the key points of the work of the Ministry of Education in 2013 were to promote the ‘connotative development’ of higher education and to optimise discipline and speciality, personnel training type, hierarchical structure and regional layout of higher education. Since 2014, although the text of the annual key points of work of the Ministry of Education has not utilised the concept of ‘connotation development of higher education’, its related work, such as the layout and structural adjustment of Higher Education, the construction of first-class disciplines, etc., provided the foundation for the ‘connotation development’ of higher education as the starting point and purpose of reformation. In October 2017, the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed to realise the ‘connotative development’ of higher education. From the promotion of the report of the 18th National Congress to the realisation of the report of the 19th National Congress, the ‘connotative development’ of China’s higher education has realised the transformation from the development mode to the unification of the development mode and purpose, and further clarified and emphasised the dominant position of the ‘connotative development’ orientation in China’s national higher education policy. Thus, in the future, ‘connotative development’ will be the main orientation of the national higher education policy to have a more in-depth and comprehensive vertical and horizontal expansion.

In August 2015, China issued the Overall Plan for Promoting the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines, which involved promoting the building of world-class universities and disciplines in a coordinated way and promoting China’s historic leap from a major country in higher education to a strong country in higher education. Dubbed ‘Double Tops’, the new plan is seen as the country’s third higher education development plan reflecting the will of the state. In October 2017, the report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) called for the connoting development of higher education. From the ‘promotion’ of the report of the 18th National Congress to the ‘realisation’ of the report of the 19th National Congress, the connotative development of China’s higher education has realised the transformation from the development mode to the unity of development mode and purpose, further clarifying and emphasising the dominant position of the connotative development orientation in China’s national higher education policy. It indicates that the national higher education policy, which is mainly oriented by ‘connotation development’, will carry out a more in-depth and comprehensive vertical and horizontal expansion in the coming period. In June 2018, the National Conference on Undergraduate Education in the new era was held, which sounded the clarion to comprehensively revitalise undergraduate education. The Ministry of Education accelerated the planning of high-level undergraduate education to comprehensively improve the ability of personnel training. More and more colleges and universities are actively adapting to the new needs of national strategic development and the new trend of higher education development in the world, putting undergraduate education at the core position of talent training, education and teaching, and education development in the new era, striving to create sustainable reforms in higher education.

In 2018, General Secretary Xi Jinping once again stressed at the teacher-student forum of Peking University: ‘The scale and number of graduates of higher education in China have already ranked first in the world. However, expansion of scale does not mean quality and benefit growth, and the path of connotative development is the only way for the development of higher education in China’. Thus, in the new era, ‘connotative development’ is a way of

development that is different from scale and quantity expansion, and truly returns to higher education itself as it stimulates development vitality from within colleges and universities.

CHARACTERISTICS AND PROSPECT OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

(1) NATIONAL WILL IS THE DIRECT DRIVING FORCE FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

The decision of the CPC Central Committee on the reform of the education system, the first national education working conference and the convening of the 12th National Congress of the CPC promoted the first leap towards the development of higher education. The decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to deepen education reform and promote quality education and the convening of the third National Conference on education work regarded higher education as an important driving force for social and economic development and promoted the second leap in furthering the development of higher education. Especially from 1999–2002, the scale of enrolment and the scale of learning doubled in three years, and the gross enrolment rate increased by five percentage points to 15%. China's higher education has entered the stage of popularisation. The realisation of this goal is of great strategic significance because it fully shows the great role of the national will in the speedy development of higher education.

(2) OPTIMISING THE ALLOCATION OF EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IS THE INEVITABLE CHOICE FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

The rapid growth of China's economy has brought about new and higher requirements for the development of higher education, which requires colleges and universities to provide talents and intellectual support for economic and social development. High-level universities should provide intellectual support for innovative talents and scientific research innovation. Local colleges and universities should transform to serve the local economic and social development, and higher vocational colleges should cultivate high-quality technical talents. At the same time, the social wealth created by China's rapid economic growth provides a financial guarantee for the popularisation of higher education. Even though the effects of the global financial crisis and the domestic economic development speed has been reduced in recent years, the investment and support for higher education should be maintained. Since 2012, the proportion of national financial education expenditure to GDP has remained above 4%. In 2018, the investment in higher education accounted for 26.04% of the total investment in national education.

A series of special plans for higher education, such as 'double first-class' construction, should be carried out. The development of private higher education has attracted social funds into the field of higher education (Binglin & Xinfeng, 2019). Human material and financial resources are not only the guaranteed conditions for improving quality but also the basic elements for improving quality. 'Promoting development by standards is the fundamental way of future education development and promoting development by standards is an important factor in quality improvement. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2030 Framework for Action on Education, it is proposed that countries should allocate at least 4% - 6% of GDP or 15% - 20% of public expenditure to education according to international and regional distribution benchmarks ('The new concept of education and the growing point of China's education during the 13th five-year plan', 2016). The Chinese government has ensured investment, expanded supply, optimised the allocation of educational resources, and promoted the development of institutions of higher learning.

At the same time of strengthening the educational responsibility of the government, institutions should innovate public service supply, broaden the channels of higher education resources, expand the effective supply of higher education services, improve the efficiency of higher education resources allocation, and meet the diversified needs of higher education learners. Institutions should strengthen performance evaluation, guide the scientific orientation, fair competition and diversified development of colleges and universities, and focus on the ‘connotation development’ and improve the quality of education and teaching (Jinghuan et al., 2017).

(3) MEETING THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE AND SOCIETY IS THE FUNDAMENTAL DRIVING FORCE FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

It is the core idea of the modernisation of higher education to put people first, promote the holistic development of people, and the sustainable development of society. The educational nature of higher education is its fundamental attribute. People are the starting point, foothold, and destination of higher education modernisation. The core of educational modernisation is the modernisation of human beings. It is the modernisation of humans centred on the educational system, system, concept and behaviour. China's higher education aims towards 2030 must highlight the core concept of people-orientation by comprehensively improving the quality of higher education and promoting the overall development of human beings and the sustainable development of society (Jinghuan et al., 2017).

Increasing the supply of higher education services on a large scale and meeting the people's strong desire for higher education has become the fundamental motivation for the second stage of development of higher education in China. At the same time, easing the economic crisis brought about by the financial crisis and the employment pressure caused by the reform of state-owned enterprises has become an important reason for the expansion of higher education in China.

Promoting the integral development of human beings and meeting the needs of social development are also the fundamental standards in the measurement of the quality of education. The state should take service, economic, and social development as an important direction of education to fully adapt to the needs of innovation, coordination, open and shared development, and reflect the status, role and value of education in service.

(4) ‘CONNOTATIVE DEVELOPMENT’ AND QUALITY PROMOTION ARE THE BASIC TRENDS IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA.

The extension and connotation of higher education are dialectical. They are interdependent and mutually conditional. Without the extension, there will be no connotation. Without connotation, there will be no extension. The connotation of development needs to be expanded to have influence and effect, to be more definite and specific, while the extension needs to be based on the connotation, and the extension with rich connotation can show more quality and benefit.

To constantly improve the universality of education, institutions should employ the achievements of modern science and technology, reform systems, contents and methods of education, improve the supply side of education, and improve the overall level and quality of higher education. The sustainable development of higher education must strike a balance between improving quality and promoting equity. Efforts should be made to eliminate obstacles in the system, mechanism, ideology, and concept, stimulate the consensus of the government, society, industry, colleges, and universities on the development of high-quality higher education, and enable more people to enjoy higher quality education (Jinghuan et al., 2017), while further improving access to higher education. Efforts should also be made to improve the access and quality of higher education for vulnerable groups.

Promoting the opportunities of higher education for vulnerable groups is not only conducive to further expanding the scale of higher education, but also to the further harmonious development of society. By employing specific measures, such as reducing the regional differences in higher education opportunities between urban and rural residents, and higher education among residents of different socio-economic backgrounds. At the same time, carrying out and strengthening vocational and technical education for migrant workers is of great significance to expand educational opportunities and improve the quality of the labour force (Shouping, 2019).

CONCLUSION

To elevate higher education to meet the people's wishes and the needs of economic and social development, China's higher education must address three major practical problems. First, the state should exert efforts to expand high-quality higher education resources while appropriately expanding the scale and focus on improving the quality of higher education, especially the quality of talent training. Second, the government should make a reasonable allocation in the long-term process of improving the quality of higher education learning by addressing limited high-quality higher education resources and vigorously promoting the equity of higher education, especially the equity of enrolment opportunities. Third, active promotion of the internationalisation of higher education should be conducted and constant improvement of the international influence of China's higher education, especially the voice in the international academic community. Therefore, the development mode of higher education in China is still undergoing profound changes based on the extension development characterised by scale expansion and space expansion in relation to the 'connotation development' centred on improving quality and optimising structure.

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