

Road to the world-class university

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China's universities will soon be subjected to a new round of evaluation for inclusion into the so-called 'Double World-Class Project', which aims to build world-class universities and world-class disciplines. Many people regard this as a new plan to allocate central government's resources for boosting higher education in China. Although details of the new project remain to be released, it has already incited a lot of discussions and concerns. Will there be an impartial mechanism to properly evaluate the universities? What do Chinese universities really need now in order to achieve 'world-class' status?

China's ambition to possess some world-class universities is not alone in the world. The demand for world-class universities in other Asian countries and Europe seems equally urgent. It seems that the notion of higher education is undergoing a fundamental shift in recent years: more emphasis has been put on productivity and efficiency over scholarship, traditional knowledge dissemination and societal impacts. This shift may be related to a growing global consensus that high-quality universities are vital to advance a nation's economic development. Nevertheless, a university has other important missions. It ought to produce not only scientists, engineers and technological innovations, but also intellectuals who contribute to society with their unique vision, perspectives and expertise that are indispensable for the long-term healthy development of a nation and the world.

What is a world-class university? Most people would resort this to the University Ranking. Moving up in the ranking becomes a goal for many universities, leading to the situation dubbed by some as the 'educational arms race'. Criteria used for evaluation vary among different ranking systems. Yet, how can a ranking measure the ethos and the societal impact of a university? How can one count those faculty members or alumni who have made remarkable sociopolitical, economic and cultural contributions but did not publish any papers? Back to the evaluation of universities for the 'Double World-Class Project' in China, is it yet another ranking effort or a part of the extra bureaucracy for the universities?

As a country with a population over one billion, China has more than 2000 universities. Only a small portion of them will be included in the 'Double World-Class Project'. What would happen to the rest of the universities with varied goals and responsibilities? The USA has most of the top universities in the world because it also has the best higher-education system that

includes hundreds of high-quality universities. Considering the current situation in China, it is as important, if not more important, to have hundreds of high-quality universities as having a few dozen first-rate universities. Some provincial governments have recently announced their own 'Double World-Class Project' policy, with provision for matching funds for high-ranked universities in their provinces. Such politically correct policy should probably not be recommended, since they should invest more into some local universities that are unlikely to be listed in the project.

Beyond the ambition to be world-class, Chinese universities currently have many more pressing issues to worry about and immediate difficulties to overcome, such as overall low teaching quality, lack of critical thinking, lack of significantly original research results and low efficiency of technology transfer. In addition, more attention should be given to the cultivation of university culture, including critical thinking, leadership and vision, ethics and values, and social responsibility, in addition to the dissemination of knowledge and skills for professional employment.

Governments' investment is critical to the development of higher education. Yet, it takes generations of academics to build a world-class university. The government should be more patient and relieve the pressure on the universities in climbing the global rankings. Chinese universities need sources, and they also need a good university management system that ensures a reasonable wage and salary range, and independence in running the university and in educating its students. Many more Chinese universities should focus on producing well-rounded citizens for the country, and be provided with a fair chance in the competition for funding with high-ranked universities. Government should avoid further increase in the already large gap between top universities and the rest, and prevent many of the current abnormal ways of competing for talents. Finally, the government and universities should all deliberate further on what a world-class university really means for China, before embarking on the drive for it.

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