Chinese Open Universities: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Chinese education has a long history, and the Chinese higher education system is the largest in the world, but open universities in China are not at the same level as they are in developed countries. This article provides an overview of the recent development in the open universities system in China. Specifically, the article discusses the positive impact open universities have and the difficulties they need to deal with. The potential for further developing Chinese open universities is considered. In addition, challenges are discussed, and recommendations are made for improving these open universities.

Keywords: China, Chinese Universities, Education, Higher Education, Open Universities

INTRODUCTION

If Confucius (551 - 479 BC) is considered the beginning of Chinese education, it has a history of over 2,500 years. However, for over 2,000 years education was a privilege only few could enjoy. In 1949, the People’s Republic of China was established, and elementary and secondary education was made available for more children, but higher education remained inaccessible for the vast majority. For almost three decades the Chinese higher education participation rate stayed at about three percent of the age group (Guo, 2011).

In 1978 the Chinese government implemented a policy of reforming and opening up, and higher education began to develop in a speed that had never been seen before. The higher education participation rate increased from around 3 percent in 1978 to 30 percent in 2012 (Ministry of Education, August 16, 2013). However, when compared with developed countries, the higher education participation rate in China is still low. The average tertiary type-A level education entry rate in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in 2011 was 60 percent (OECD, 2013). In June 2013 approximately 9 million Chinese took the higher education entry examination (Lu, 2013), but only about 6.9 million would be admitted into various programs in the fall (CCTV, July 6, 2013). It seems that part of the demand for higher education is not met by the current supply. It is estimated that the situation of supply not meeting demand will continue for the coming decade (Wei & Yuan, 2012).

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In addition to the issue of accessibility, the opportunities for developing human capital vary greatly in China, depending on whether a person is rural or urban, a migrant or a local resident in an urban area, and in an eastern coastal or western inland province (World Bank, 2012). There are significant gaps in the development of higher education across regions and social groups. These gaps negatively affect families in western rural areas with low incomes when they aspire to access higher education. The increasing participation rate does not give a very accurate picture of higher education development. Higher education is still not available in some remote western rural areas. With tuitions rising rapidly, higher education is difficult for poor families to access. In addition, the increasing availability of higher education makes people pay more attention to quality (Zhou & Wang, 2013).

Zhou (2007) points out three opportunity inequities in Chinese higher education: (1) inequity among students from different regions of the country, with students in the eastern regions having an advantage over those in the western regions; (2) inequity among students from different social groups, with students from rich families having an advantage over those from poor families; (3) inequity among institutions due to government policies, with institutions in higher categories having an advantage over those in lower categories. Chinese higher education institutions can be classified into eight categories: with the top category receiving the most government funding per student but the bottom two categories receiving nothing from the government (Jiang & Li, 2012). The eastern regions refer to the provinces and municipalities directly under the national government in eastern China where most major cities are located and population density is higher. The western regions refer to the 14 provinces and ethnic autonomous regions in western China which have only 23 percent of the country’s population but 56 percent of its area (Wang, 2010). In addition, China’s transition to a marketized social system has introduced new sources of inequality into the provision and availability of higher education (Ertl & Kai, 2010). Although today more youth receive higher education, inequality in access to higher education has actually increased (The Economist, 2014).

Over coming decades China needs to pursue social policies that promote equality of opportunity. Social policies will need to focus on promoting human capital development, and all citizens should have equality of opportunity in education. China’s rapid growth has been accompanied by a gradual decline in its agricultural surplus labor and a steady rise in real wages in manufacturing, a trend that appears to have accelerated recently. Without concomitant increases in labor productivity, real wage increases lead to a steady decline in international competitiveness. Increasing the quality of human capital will not only increase labor productivity and maintain China’s competitiveness; it will also allow Chinese manufacturing and services to move up the value chain. Improvement in the quality of human capital will require better education (World Bank, 2012), particularly better higher education.

In January 2014, China Internet Network Information Center reported that about 618 million Chinese had used the Internet regularly as of December 31, 2013. This places China as the country with the most Internet users in the world. About 46 percent of the Chinese population has used the Internet, which means today Chinese use information and communication technology (ICT) more extensively in their life, including in higher education. With increasingly sophisticated ICT, it is easier for Chinese learners to receive distance education than before (Wang, 2010). However, when compared with the United States where about 78 percent of the population use the Internet regularly (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2014), the gap is still great. In terms of ICT use there are also obvious gaps within China between eastern regions and western regions with western regions lagging behind. While proportionately Chinese lag behind people in developed countries in using the Internet, the increase in the number of Internet users in 2013 is approximately 3.7 percent in China (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2014), higher than that...
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