

The New Decade of Reforms in China's Higher Education

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While China's higher education has undergone almost four decades of reforms since the restoration of the national college entrance exam (the gaokao) in 1977, the currents of trending reforms are still propelling the sector, ranging from quality reforms, to governance reforms, to the gaokao reforms, to name a few. Although by no means exhaustive, this list of reforms is representative of the most important ones as planned in the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*. As such, there is reason to believe that a brief discussion of these reforms could shed light on current and trending issues in China's higher education.

The quality reform began a year after China transitioned from elite to mass higher education era in 2002. Basically, this reform has focused on enhancing the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning by means of reforms and resource sharing. It comprises six types of granting programs, including disciplinary-program revamping and specialized accreditation; curriculum, textbook, and resource sharing; teaching and learning, and talent-nurturing innovation; instructional-team and eminent faculty-team building; evaluation and public disclosure of general teaching and learning conditions; and support for postsecondary institutions in the western regions of China. Clearly, these programs have greatly raised people's awareness of the importance of teaching and learning; at the same time, however, due to the fact that conflicts of interest have not been well addressed and that a culture of winner-take-all has disheartened morale in the setting of higher education, there exists a gap between rhetoric and reality. As a result, the importance of teaching and learning is widely acknowledged but it is generally believed that research ought to carry much more weight than teaching in from one's survival to thrival in academia.

Later, based on the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, higher education governance reform was launched in 2010. This reform has manifested itself primarily in the form of policy making and policy implementation by the Ministry of Education, including *the Interim Regulations on Drafting the Charter of Postsecondary Institutions* issued in 2011, *the Academic Council Regulations at Postsecondary Institutions* issued in 2014, *Opinions on Promoting the Separation of Powers of Higher Education and on the Transition of Government Functions* issued in 2015. Under the direction of these policies, over eighty institutions of higher education have drafted their institutional charters. While these charters have institutionalized the structure and process of authoritative decision making across issues that are significant for external and internal stakeholders, they have definitely left something to be desired. For example, how to select the president and evaluate his/her performance is something missing in the charter. Moreover, at the national or the regional level, there is a lack of law or policy which should stipulate how to restructure the power of stakeholders at either of the two levels.

In the same vein, based on the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, in 2014, pilot gaokao reforms were initiated in Shanghai and Zhejiang, the "testing grounds" for nationwide reforms to be enforced in 2020. According to the reform guidelines made by the State Council in 2014, the general goal of the reform is to institutionalize merit-based education admission systems in order to advance equity in education, enable scientific selection of talents, ensure strong oversight, streamline K-16 educational systems, and recognize diverse learning outcomes. As

elaborated in the guidelines, the reform is designed in a way to grapple with the problems of the inequality in access of higher education from region-to-region, especially to key colleges and universities, to afford students more flexibility in the selection of test subjects and undergraduate majors, to integrate comprehensive quality evaluation results at the level of high schools with the gaokao test scores in the decision making of college admissions. While these goals and efforts are enticing, it is probable that, unless a bottom-up design is in place to identify, decompose, and refine the major components of the top-down design, potentials of the proposed reforms will not be realized. As such, special efforts are wanted to provide incentives for schools and their teachers to change, to address conflicts of interest in college admissions, and to hold accountable those responsible for the abuse of their discretionary powers.

It is safe to state that current and trending issues in China's higher education include, but are not limited to: how to merge top-down reforms with bottom-up engagement, how to construct check and balance mechanisms, regulate powers, and legitimize authoritative decision making across issues that are significant for external and internal stakeholders, how to address conflicts of interest and reduce arbitrariness in the decision making at various levels, and how to counteract institutional inertia and facilitate change through challenge and support instead of coercion and manipulation. Additionally, China as a market for higher education providers, particularly those in the UK, USA, and Australia, is another major topic in itself, and has a profound and resounding effect on the landscape of global higher education. As China's landscape evolves with demand, diversification, and a rise in competition amongst students and their families, so evolves the global environment of higher education. Albeit difficult, China's higher education has been progressing steadily toward its goals.