

Distance Education in China: Connecting Millions for Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Chinese education has a long history, and the Chinese higher education system is the largest in the world, but distance higher education in China started later than it did in developed countries. This article provides an overview of the recent distance higher education development in China. Specifically, the article discusses the positive impact distance higher education has had and the difficulties that have to be dealt with. The potential for further developing distance education is considered. In addition, challenges are discussed, and recommendations are made to improve distance education.

Keywords: China, Distance Education, Higher Education, Knowledge, Online Learning

CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION

If Confucius (551-479 BC) is considered the beginning of Chinese education, it has a history of over 2,500 years. In Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) the first civil service examination program was instituted to find common people to fill public positions based on knowledge and ability, not genealogy. This national examination system was used with little variation for nearly 2,000 years through the following dynasties until its abolishment in 1905. During these 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 Chinese higher education began to develop in a speed that had never been seen before. Since then Chinese higher education has made impressive progress. When the participation rate in higher education is between 15 and 50 percent, it can be considered mass education (Trow, 1973). Chinese higher education participation rate increased from around 3 percent in 1978 to 26.5 percent in 2010 with over 30 million students (Chinese Ministry of Education, November 14, 2011), which can be considered mass education. However, when compared with developed countries, the higher education participation rate in China is still low. The average tertiary education entry rate in the

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Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in 2009 was 59 percent (OECD, 2012). In June 2011 approximately 9.3 million Chinese took the higher education entry examination (Guo, 2011), but only about 6.8 million were admitted into various programs in the fall (Chinese Ministry of Education, December 30, 2011). 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).

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 some families, especially families in western rural areas with low incomes. The increased 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, and there are concerns.

Some employers are experiencing a serious shortage of the skills required to upgrade processes and the product mix. For China to become an innovative knowledge economy, increased investment in human capital will be critical to the building of analytic and complex reasoning capabilities, enhancing scientific literacy and the knowledge base of students, encouraging creativity, and instilling communication and teamwork skills. Raising the volume and quality of skills demands innovation in pedagogical techniques with greater use of multimedia and flexible online training customized to the varying needs of students so as to raise the productivity of the education sector overall and to maximize the benefits from

the limited pool of talented instructors and the available physical facilities (World Bank, 2012). Chinese educators understand that to catch up with developed countries economically, they have to catch up educationally.

The development of higher education is quite uneven, with most institutions located in the eastern coastal cities of the country. Over coming decades China needs to pursue social policies that promote equality of opportunity. Social policy 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.

Zhou (2007) points out that there are 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 caused by competition among institutions due to government policies, with institutions in higher categories having an advantage over those in lower categories. Chinese higher education institutions are classified into eight categories: with the top category receiving the most government funding per student and the bottom two categories receiving nothing (Jiang & Li, 2012). The eastern regions refer to the provinces and municipalities directly under the national government in eastern China where

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