



Differences in higher education reforms: India and China

■ Wenjuan Zhang

Former Indian President Mr. Pranab Mukherjee said, “No country can aspire to become a sustainable superpower without becoming a knowledge powerhouse.” As two of the fastest growing economies in the world, India and China have realized the importance of knowledge economy, and

the critical role of higher education for building such an economy.

I have observed that the approaches of China and India differ, with respect to reforms in higher education. These approaches have evidently been influenced by the two country’s economic development path and governance structure.

The Different Strategy of Liberating Higher Education

One of the most neglected discussions

when we compare India and China are the different strategies adopted by the two countries for liberating higher education, to meet the demand of economic liberalization. The strategy of economic liberalization in India followed the principle of large-scale privatization. This included the field of higher education.

The best way I can speak of China’s reforms in the higher education sector is this: China has tried to infuse its public universities with some



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While China has tried to infuse its public universities with some flavor of marketization, India has created good space for the growth of private universities

flavor of marketization.

The Indian approach has created good space for the growth of private universities. But the approach has left the challenges faced by public universities untouched. According to data released by the India's University Grants Commission (UGC), by the end of September 2018, India had 318 private universities. This is about a third of the total universities in India – public and private. There are more than 36,000 colleges in India. More than 60% of them

are in the private sector. This shows us that private universities and colleges have a robust growth in India.

Currently, private universities in India still face several challenges. Many private universities have been established by big corporate houses. In this way, they are another area of business of the corporate houses for the purpose of profit-making. There is very little external monitoring in the operations of private universities. Their accountability is mainly enforced

by the market.

But their potential is huge. While many private universities are profit-oriented, one can see some of them operating with vision, and with the mission of pursuing world-class excellence. This self-discipline mechanism among Indian private universities of achieving global standards will enable them to be competitive not just domestically but also globally.

In addition, it is expected that the constitutional protection in India, along with freedom of expression and judicial review, should help ensure a liberal political environment for academic freedom and critical thinking in private universities.

The main focus of the public universities in India, meanwhile, is to provide access to higher education with low fee and the adequate reservation for minorities. These institutions are insulated from market pressure. A negative fall-out of this insulation is that there is little incentive or autonomy to invest and reform themselves. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen was critical that Indian public universities function like government agencies – bureaucratic, and low on efficiency. I met an American Indian student of Harvard University four years ago, who wanted to connect his university with some Indian universities for collaboration. He told me that some government universities in India responded to his email a year later. He was shocked by the lethargy in their approach.

The Chinese approach

The Chinese approach towards reforms in the higher education sector has been different. China has encouraged its public universities to be a little market oriented but with little attention to the development of private universities.

In 1999, the Central Government released the 'Action Plan for Building Chinese Universities Meeting the Demand of 21st Century'. This vision led to a big policy shift in the higher education sector. The shift happened in their focus. It shifted from a phase of cultivating elites to a phase of expanding public



access to higher education. Within the political boundary, universities have been granted administrative autonomy. This includes modest increase of tuition fee, some discretion to develop market-oriented programs, some autonomy to develop joint programs with foreign universities, and some space to transfer intellectual property into university-owned enterprises.

The model also made the public universities financially more independent, since the university's funding could now be partly from the government, and partly from the market. According to the data released by the Ministry of Education in China, by May 2017 there were 2,631 universities in the country, including 265

independent colleges.

The reform has come with trade-offs. The fast expansion of public universities has made it difficult for private universities to compete with them. From the 1980s, China allowed the establishment of private universities. According to Xinhua News, by May 2016 there were 417 private universities in China. Almost all of them belong to third-tier in qualitative terms and reputation, struggling with student enrollment and outstanding faculty recruitment.

Hurdles for the development of private universities are not just from the market, but also from the glass ceiling of political distrust and policy restriction. But unlike India, China has opened its



higher education sector to foreigners. While domestic private universities have seen limited growth, joint ventures of foreign and Chinese partnership have done well. Some examples of this are the NYU Shanghai, Duke-Kunshan University, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, School of Transnational Law, Peking University etc.

Difference in Perspective towards Quality Control and Ranking

The fast expansion of Chinese universities raised concerns regarding quality in the late 1990s. How to distribute the limited government resources also needed justification. This made the Chinese

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government play a very active role in quality control and the promotion of excellence in higher education. For this purpose, the Chinese government experimented with various merit-based mechanisms.

The first was the 211 Project, which was initiated in the early 1990s. '211' meant that China wanted to help 100 universities with the highest potentials to meet the demands of 21st century with more policy and funding support. By 2011, the Ministry of Education said that no more universities would be listed on the 211 Project, since 112 universities were already on the list.

In May 1998, President Jiang Zemin proposed another project which focused on helping top Chinese universities become world-class universities. This project is also known as the 985 Project. A total of 39 Chinese universities are on this list, and get heavy funding from the government.

In November 2015, the Chinese central government released a policy named the 'Comprehensive Plan for Building World-Class Universities and World-Class Disciplines'. By then, the 211 Project was almost stopped. The 985 Project was integrated into the comprehensive plan.

China also realized the limits of the 211 Project and the 985 Project. Hence, from 2017, China started a new dynamic

grading system, which is called "Double First Class Ranking". There are three key differences in this system, which set it apart from the 211 and 985 projects. First, the grading is annual. Life-time recognition isn't granted.

Second, the project differentiates between the ranking of the university and the ranking of disciplines. This gives non-prestigious universities hope to develop some prestigious disciplines. Third, the grading system connects domestic ranking with global standards. For example, global ranking is one of the indicators for the Double First Class Ranking. This has created a new culture for Chinese universities to pay attention to the global rankings.

In addition to the ranking of universities in China, there are also different "ranking" mechanisms for faculty. This ranking may be national, provincial or local. The popular ranking mechanisms are known as Changjiang Scholar, One Thousand Outstanding Scholars, Outstanding Young Scholars etc. The scholars within the programs have better access to academic resources, market resources and even extra monetary incentives. The percentage of outstanding faculty is also an indicator for the discipline and the over-all university ranking. This creates more market value for the faculty engaged in the programs.

Beyond the competition among



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faculty, disciplines and universities, now cities have also joined the competition for attracting outstanding faculty, schools and universities. China is shifting her value chain from manufacturing to innovation. Cities that used to compete for FDI in manufacturing now compete for outstanding universities in order to promote knowledge economy. Shenzhen, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Qingdao, Ningbo and Kunshan etc. have started the city-level competition for attracting outstanding universities or schools to have a joint campus or sub-campus in their city. They compete with factors such as provision of free land, large amount of money in infrastructure building, degree of

academic freedom etc.

The competitive ranking or accreditation – for faculty, discipline, university or city – has created a dynamic discourse of higher education development in China. This has also made the Chinese academic field very competitive and market-oriented. Many concerns have been raised. Some believe that the focus is excessive on ‘quantifying education’, but the essence of education is getting substantially neglected. There are also fears that competitiveness causes intellectual corruption and plagiarism.

In India, higher education governance structure is much more complicated than that in China. Unlike the Chinese govern-

ment, the Indian government hesitates to intervene in the general development of higher education. UGC, an autonomous body, has more say in the quality standard of universities. There is also the accreditation system developed by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) of UGC.

I believe that the NAAC accreditation is a good system for focusing on certain standards, but it avoids making the universities too competitive.

However, the probing of the following two questions could help in examining the role of NAAC. One, how does the NAAC accreditation help in creating incentives for Indian universities to pursue excellence in higher education. Second, what is the extent to which NAAC accreditation can help, guide and push Indian universities toward achieving global standards.

Realizing the need for creating further incentive among universities, India has tried some new efforts. This year, the Ministry of Human Resources Development granted autonomy to 60 highest grade universities and colleges. Another initiative named the Institute of Eminence program has also been started in 2018. In addition to these government efforts, some universities and institutes have tried to invite international ranking to come to India, such as the QS-India ranking.

I may sum up by saying that China has benefited from the strong government policy and funding support for world-class universities. Tsinghua University recently ranked as the top university in Asia. People also expect that there will be some reduction in the quantitative assessment among universities, and more attention will be given to qualitative growth. For India, if there is a visible criteria for evaluation with global reference, Indian universities can improve their rankings significantly. In the long run, especially in the field of social sciences, I believe some Indian private universities will be much more competitive than Chinese universities in terms of critical thinking and theoretical contribution. □