CHAPTER 12

Scale, Speed, Quality and Characteristic: Issues in Modern Chinese Higher Education

1 Entering into the Twenty-first Century, Higher Education in China Has Been Developing with Sound Momentum

The biggest change of China’s higher education is that at the turn of the century—namely, shortly after the beginning of the twenty-first century—China’s higher education demonstrated a sound momentum in its development.

1.1 An Increasing Number of Students

An increase in the number of students is also referred to as enrollment expansion. Enrollment expansion in China took its start in 1999. Because of it, the number of college students increased from 6.43 million in 1998 (the year prior to the one when enrollment expansion started) to 23 million in 2005, more than tripling within seven years. China has become a major country in terms of higher education, with the largest number of college students in the world. China has far surpassed the United States, where the number of college students is around 17 million, let alone India and Russia. Its gross enrollment ratio of higher education has reached 21%. Since a gross enrollment ratio of 15% is the symbol of the massification stage, China has already entered the stage of mass higher education with its enrollment ratio reaching higher than 15%. And, of course, the number will continue to increase (the only difference is that the rate of increase will slow). The number of college students out of each ten thousand people in China has reached around 150. According to international standards, there are two indicators to calculate the number of college students. The first is gross enrollment ratio, which counts the number of college students among young adults of the appropriate age; the second is the number of college students out of each ten thousand people. According to these factors, China has entered the stage of mass higher education and gone above the world’s average standard (the gross enrollment ratio of the world’s average standard is around 18%). Therefore, China has surpassed many countries in terms of the relative number of college students.

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1.2 Diversity of Schools

The premise of massification is bound to be diversification. Simplification can never turn into massification; only diversification can lead to massification. Higher education institutions in China appear in diversified forms, including universities, colleges, higher vocational colleges, junior colleges, full-time regular colleges, higher vocational institutions, higher education institutions run by local governments, Sino-foreign collaborative universities, and various non-degree and noncertificate education institutions. All forms of higher education institutions available in other countries are basically available in China, as are forms of higher education institutions that are not available in other countries. Cases in point include self-taught examination for higher education as well as postgraduate education and higher vocational education, both of which are developing with sound momentum; higher education run by local governments is also developing rapidly; nongovernmental higher education used to be nonexistent. When it was first initiated, there were only a small number of students, whereas now this form of higher education is enjoying rapid development. Now the number of students in nongovernmental higher education institutions has taken up 15% of the total number of college students nationwide; besides that, there are also Sino-foreign collaborative schools, the number of which is hard to count. What’s more, this kind of school can be found in various regions. A case in point is the popular 2+2 program, where students study in China for the first two years and study abroad for the remaining two years; there is also nondegree education, which takes the form of training. This form of development also shows that a lifelong learning system is growing, and the world is stepping into a learning society. It can be said that a learning-oriented society is taking shape in China, with more than 300 million people studying.

1.3 Improved Quality of Teaching in Some Aspects

Nowadays, the English proficiency and computer skills of college students have been significantly enhanced. In the last century, very few college students were able to listen and speak in English. In comparison, now the absolute majority of postgraduates in China are able to listen and speak in English. Although their English proficiency is not very satisfactory, the overall level has been enhanced. Improvement of computer skills has seen much greater progress, as previously none of the students were able to use computers. Now college students are able to use computers with proficiency. Apart from this, the humanistic quality of college students has also been improved. The government regards the cultivation of innovation capacity and the practical ability of college students as a top priority. Initial results have been achieved in