

China's Elite Sector and National Projects

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Socioeconomic transformation and growth in China have led to unprecedented changes in higher education, in the last three decades. National initiatives to enhance leading universities' capacity and competitiveness include the 211 and 985 Projects. The history of such initiatives can, however, be traced back to the early 1950s, when the Ministry of Education recognized six universities as the "key universities." Since then, a system of key universities has been formed and developed, which has greatly influenced and shaped higher education structure and reform in China.

Identifying "Key Universities" (1950s to 1960s)

Soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government realized the significant role of higher education in nation building. Based on the Russian experience, the government issued the Decision on Key Universities and Terms of Reference. This program stipulated that the main responsibilities of key universities were to train a high-quality workforce and to develop a high-quality teaching force. Six universities were selected and recognized as the key universities for concentrated development. From the late 1950s to the 1960s, three further groups of universities were awarded a key university status by the government.

This stage was initiated and supported by the government, in response to national socioeconomic needs. Key university status was awarded by the government, but the criteria were not clear. Furthermore, instead of providing substantial funding support, the relevant policies and regulations only emphasized the role of teaching and training for the workforce, with no follow-up evaluation of these selected universities' performance.

Resuming Key Universities” (1970s to 1980s)

These policies and initiatives were disrupted during the Cultural Revolution and resumed in 1978, when the Report on the National Key Universities Recommencement and Development was issued by the State Council. The report emphasized the role of national key universities as “the centers of teaching and research in higher education” and solving the key scientific problems regarding modernization. It reiterated that these model universities would lead higher education reform in China.

Since then, the system of key universities has been institutionalized. The number of key universities increased from 64 in 1963 to 97 in the late 1970s. In 1980, key universities were the first in the nation to offer graduate-degree programs. Attention has also been given to both basic and applied research in these universities. Regulated in policy documents, research funding was invested in key universities and research centers. Governance reform was also introduced in the key universities—in terms of leadership, teaching resource allocation, and student recruitment. In addition, the administration of these key universities was restructured. All of the key universities defined during this stage initiated public institutions, administered by the central ministries; but in the 1980s, the number of universities affiliated with the central ministries reduced substantially and a large number of which were relegated to a co-administration between the central ministries and provincial authorities.

The 211 Project

Higher education expansion and restructuring in the 1990s produced a large quantity of highly skilled workers and, to some extent, served the skill demands of economic development. However, the government realized the country’s relatively weak performance of knowledge creation and innovation, which required overall quality improvement in its higher education sector. It was in this context that the 211 Project was implemented in 1995 by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance.

The 211 Project objective is developing about 100 universities and a number of key disciplines by the early 21st century, to take a leading position in the country’s socioeconomic development and in international competition. This funding scheme focuses mainly on four aspects of development: disciplinary and interdisciplinary programs, digital campuses, faculty, and university infrastructure. Currently, the 211 Project is in its third phase, with 109 universities listed in the project, so far.

The 211 Project differs from the earlier initiatives of simply “listing”

key universities both in their scale and by actually identifying and funding the means by which excellence in Chinese universities can best be promoted. Due to the large number of universities and research centers supported, however, the investment in each individual university has been rather limited, which has tended to reduce its institutional impact.

The 985 Project

To further enhance the public funding for higher education, the government launched the 985 Project, in 1998. This project again reflects the government's goal and efforts to develop a tertiary education system of international stature. The Ministry of Education issued the Action Plan for Education Revitalization for the 21st Century and implemented the 985 Project to establish a number of "world-class" universities and to develop a number of key research centers of excellence. This project aims at exploring new mechanisms for higher education governance, improving universities' global competitiveness, and developing a path for building worldclass universities, but with Chinese characteristics.

The 985 Project has thus far supported 39 selected universities, with financial investment from both the central and the local governments. The accompanying policy document identified 9 of the selected universities—considered the "Chinese Ivy League"—as being at the top of the list and designated to be developed into world-class universities. The remaining 30 institutions are expected to develop the slightly lower status of the existence of "international repute." More than half of the central government funding was concentrated in the top 9 universities.

Both the 211 and 985 Projects intend to build excellence in teaching and research in Chinese higher education and are stimulated by both national and institutional needs to provide a solid base, to develop the elite sector. The 985 Project has provided the participating institutions with greater autonomy in governance to improve their national and international competitiveness and to narrow the gap in academic achievement, research performance, and science innovation with their counterparts in the world.

Impact of Developing the Elite Sector

The development of key universities since the 1950s and the implementation of the 211 and 985 Projects have had significant effects on the development of higher education in China and of higher skills. It offers opportunities for an open discussion to improve quality and explore potential routes and mechanisms to adopt in future higher education reform.

These projects have created a culture of excellence in some Chinese universities and enhanced awareness of international competition. Universities in the elite sector have played an increasingly critical role, in rejuvenating higher education as a whole and implementing socio-economic reform in China. The overall capacity of leading universities, in terms of teaching and research, has been enhanced. A group of high-quality research centers has been built, which in turn have contributed to cutting-edge research and knowledge creation. The elite universities also act as models to nonelite universities.

This development of the elite sector, however, also raises issues and reflects weakness in the Chinese higher education system. First, the current policymaking mechanism lacks well-designed public participation. A top-down policymaking approach can save costs but may potentially neglect demands from the society, universities, and students. Second, the elite-sector development in general is managed and organized with little transparency in the process of institutional selection and evaluation and with no publicly available clear criteria and requirements.