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Reform at Peking University

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China's transition—from an ossified, centrally planned system to a dynamic market economy—coincided with the revolution of information technology and the rise of the knowledge-based economy. These dramatic changes provoked a series of reforms at Peking University

From Overspecialization to More General Education

Changes in teaching and learning have been the core of reforms. Under the centrally planned economy, students were enrolled, trained, and distributed as elements of production, which was characterized by overspecialization from the beginning. Students were usually locked into a narrow field of study and had little flexibility or capacity to adapt to the technologically and economically induced changes. As the transition to a dynamic market economy proceeded, the rapidly changing needs of the labor market and accelerated rates of technological renewal called for a more competitive, flexible, and adaptive labor force. Facing these challenges, Peking University took the lead in curriculum reform. In the mid-1980s, it proposed new guidelines for undergraduate teaching and learning, calling for broadening the focus of study, emphasizing a wider knowledge base through more general education.

In 2001, Peking University went further along this line, by setting up Yuanpei College, in which students study broadly in humanities, mathematics, Chinese and foreign languages, natural, and social sciences in the first two years; and beginning in the junior year, students choose a major field of study according to their interests, aptitudes, and career expectations. This special college has become more and more popular among students. Increasing numbers of prospective students apply to enter this college, each year. The graduates of the college said that this program helped them get a well-rounded education and provide a useful background to the other courses they took later, prepared them

for lifelong learning, and made them more flexible and adaptable to labor-market changes. Interdisciplinary studies have been encouraged: students in humanities and social sciences are required to have basic knowledge in science, mathematics, and informatics, while students in science and engineering are required to have basic knowledge of humanities and social sciences.

At Peking University, teaching and learning reforms marked a shift from emphasizing the memorization of factual knowledge to the cultivation of creative and critical thinking, problem solving, and information acquisition and generation as well as intellectual independence. The economic transition and the knowledge revolution changed the basic philosophy of teaching and learning. Reform in teaching and learning has not only encouraged students to acquire existing knowledge but also to develop the ability to explore and project what will happen in the future. Thus more heuristic and participatory methods of teaching were adopted. Young people should not be trained for short-term jobs; they should rather be assisted to learn to cope with upcoming challenges, throughout their life.

The New Financing Patterns

The fast-growing economy, the rapid advancement of science and technology, and increased individual income place ever-greater demands for university education. The enrollment of Peking University increased from around 15,000 in the mid-1990s to about 35,000 in 2011/12 (almost 15,000 undergraduates, 12,000 master's, and 8,000 doctoral degree students). Previously, Peking University was completely financed by state appropriations. Given increasing financial pressures, regular state allocation could not meet growing needs. A new financing pattern at Peking University was gradually developed.

First, fund-raising has become one of the top priorities of university leaders. Through significant learning from international universities (mainly American universities), Peking University was one of the first in China to set up a university foundation, which has two functions—one is fund-raising and another is management of the endowment. When it started operating in 1995, the foundation had nothing but a desk. In the past 16 years, it has raised more than RMB 3 billion, built a dozen new buildings for the university, and accumulated RMB 1.6 billion in endowment. University leaders work together with the foundation staff on all the major gifts. The alumni network was strengthened for purposes of longterm resource mobilization.

Second, a cost-sharing system has been implemented. Peking University charged students no tuition, for most of its history. It also provided

free dormitory and other subsidies for students, which amounted to about 20 percent of the total recurrent expenditure. Along with economic transition, the private rate of return to university graduates has grown quickly. It is logical for individuals who benefit from university education to share part of the cost. Peking University began to charge tuition and fees in the late 1980s, as one of the strategies to address budget constraints. Current annual tuition equals about RMB 5,000, accounting for less than 20 percent of the unit cost per student. At same time, a financial-aid system was set up for students from needy families.

Third, Peking University also received a large amount of special funding from 211 Projects and 985 Projects, for upgrading to a world-class university. Peking University has been part of a reform effort to change the structure of government spending on education.

Fourth, the university has taken advantage of its scientific and technological innovations to generate revenue by licensing patents or by spin-off companies, such as the Founder Group—the largest spin-off company in China, with a business volume of RMB 50 billion and net profit of RMB 2 billion in 2010. Peking University has also generated funds through research contracts, technical consultation to private enterprises, and providing commissioned training for industries. With the new financing strategies, the total annual cash flow of Peking University increased from less than RMB 200 million in 1995 to more than RMB 7.5 billion, in 2011.

Emphasis on Quality Assurance

Maintaining and improving quality during the rapid expansion of enrollment has become a major concern of Peking University leaders. They stabilized the enrollment at its current size and paid more attention to quality, by first setting up quality indicators for teaching including quality of graduates—with a wide-knowledge base, critical and creative thinking, intellectual independence, problem solving and innovation capacity and skills, team-work spirit and ability, sense of social responsibility, and aesthetical and healthy, well-rounded developed people. Emphasis on research is placed on knowledge creation, breakthroughs in a new and high-tech area, high-impact factor of paper published, and think tanks for national policymaking.

Senior administrators have focused on quality inputs—such as establishing leadership for quality-assurance procedures, quality faculty, and infrastructure; quality throughputs, such as close monitoring of the teaching and research; and evaluation of quality outputs against the established quality indicators. They do believe that quality, not quantity, will make Peking University a world-class university.

Changing Attitudes and Culture

In implementing the reforms, Peking University has run into many problems and challenges, due to both structural and psychological inertia. The existing academic structure, the faculty-knowledge structure, and the old way of teaching engendered resistance to the curriculum reform. The university had to persuade and retrain teachers, get rid of the hopeless ones, and recruit a large number of new faculty members. When implementing financial reforms, university leaders and the deans did not know how to raise funds initially. The university invited international experts to run training programs, and staff were sent to American universities, such as Stanford, to learn how to produce such a course of action.

When tuition and fees were introduced—students, parents, and the society at large felt that “this is not a socialist way.” The university faced pressure and criticism at the beginning. Even today, many people still oppose the charging of tuition. They believe that the state and university should carry the full burden of cost, as before. It was even more challenging to introduce standards of quality assurance, which first required massive faculty development programs and painful personnel reforms, especially when firing incompetent teachers. It also required updating of expensive teaching and learning equipment and facilities. More importantly, it had to embed the idea, in the mind of the teachers and students, that quality must be at the center of the university life, which was simply not the case before.

Conclusion

The discussion above just touched a few major areas of reforms at Peking University. There are additional reforms at this university—in areas such as personnel policy and faculty development, student enrollment, job allocation, and internationalization. Along with the economic transition, all aspects of the university have been undergoing profound changes. Transformation is constant in order to fully appreciate Peking University, and today one has to assume a dynamic perspective.