

# Influence of Globalization on Contemporary China's Higher Education System

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## ABSTRACT

Globalization not only provides the temporal and spatial context for China's higher education system but also reshapes its form and exerts a profound influence on its development. Firstly, curriculum settings have been reformed in terms of curriculum classification, credit system, and assessment methods, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of education. Secondly, China's higher education actively adapts to the globalization pattern, incorporates the world's advanced talent training concepts, innovates the talent training model, optimizes the talent training structure, and actively constructs a scientific and efficient modern talent training system. Thirdly, China's colleges and universities draw on the experience of personnel reforms in universities around the world in aspects such as job appointments, title promotions, and evaluation indicators, which has undoubtedly formed a useful attempt to reform the teacher evaluation system.

**Keywords:** *Globalization, Higher education, China's higher education system.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, as one of the most significant signs of the contemporary era, constitutes the temporal and spatial background of China's higher education. It reshapes the form of China's higher education and has had a profound impact on the development of China's higher education system.

Tracing back to the modern history of China, the modern transformation of China's higher education system was inspired by Western systems. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a large number of Chinese youths went to the West for study, aiming to learn advanced Western modern systems, ideas, and cultures. They brought back Western academic knowledge and introduced the concepts of academic autonomy and academic freedom from Western universities to China. Meanwhile, Western churches established a series of missionary universities in China, such as Yenching University and St. John's University, which demonstrated the academic and teaching pattern of modern Western universities to the public. Although these missionary universities were gradually abolished and dissolved after the founding of the PRC, they still introduced Western educational concepts and

systems, such as credit system and course selection system, into China's educational sphere, providing exemplary models for the modernization of China's educational institutions. In the 1980s, with the advancement of China's reform and opening up, China's higher education began a series of system reforms, incorporating more Western higher education concepts into its original system.

Till today, the impact of globalization on China's higher education system is still underway, facing certain problems and showing new prospects. Decades of Chinese students pursuing overseas higher education highlighted the imbalance between Chinese and Western universities (Yao, 2004), and continues to prompt domestic reforms modeled after Canadian, British and American systems. Generally speaking, globalization has propelled China's higher education system to converge with Western higher education system in aspects such as curriculum setting, talent training, and teacher evaluation.

## 2. GLOBALIZATION HAS A PROFOUND IMPACT ON THE CURRICULUM SYSTEM OF CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

Curriculum settings in Chinese universities are deeply affected by globalization. Curriculum reforms have been carried out in terms of course classification, credit system, and student assessment.

### 2.1 *Classifying Courses*

Affected by the planned economic system in the early days of the founding of PRC, China's colleges and universities have implemented a relatively single school-running model for a long period of time. Under the guidance of this model, courses are compulsory to ensure the effectiveness of education and facilitate the management of teaching, which actually played a positive role in a certain historical period. Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China has begun to try to adjust the curriculum of colleges and universities. The first attempt is to ensure the proportion of English language courses in higher education curriculum, ensuring that students across all disciplines consistently incorporate English as an integral component of their knowledge bank. China's mandated instruction in English proved to have provided many advantages in the long run, enabling the possibility for many students to obtain their higher education in the US (Garcia, 2007). Secondly, following the example of Western university curriculum systems, courses are flexibly categorized into compulsory and elective ones. This approach not only significantly expands the diversity of course selection options for students but enables faculty members to leverage their teaching strengths within their respective specialized fields, thereby enhancing the complementary relationship between academic research and pedagogical practices. Lastly, in response to the global trend of cross-cultural exchange and mutual learning among civilizations, some universities have supplemented their specialized curricula with university-wide general education courses. These courses, typically oriented towards humanities and aesthetic education - such as History of Western Art course and Introduction to Chinese Philosophy course - aim to deepen students' understanding of both Eastern and Western cultures, establishing a knowledge base for intercultural communication. These curricular classification systems greatly optimize different educational programs, broaden students'

intellectual horizons, stimulate learning motivation and initiative, and ultimately help to cultivate professionals to navigate cross-cultural communication challenges in the globalization era.

### 2.2 *Implementing the Credit System*

The credit system first emerged in the United States, as a response to the diverse talent needs of American society, economy, and technology development in higher education. Chinese higher education was thus influenced by the university systems of western countries such as United States and Germany. In 1929, China's Ministry of Education issued a policy requiring universities to adopt and apply credit system, which has been continued to this day (Liang, 2023). However, China's credit system does not merely replicate Western educational models. Instead, it operates under the principle of maintaining disciplinary specialization while emphasizing the integration of specialized and general education, with a primary focus on specialization. With the continuous deepening of educational reforms, various credit system models have emerged in China, such as the "academic-year credit system" that combines credit-based and academic year-based approaches, and the "planned credit system" that balances the flexibility of western credit systems with structured academic guidance. The implementation of credit system in Chinese colleges and universities reflects the enduring commitment to the "student development-centered" philosophy in China's higher education. This dual-focused approach emphasizes both collective educational goals and individualized development. On one hand, it strengthens common requirements by adjusting credit allocations to prioritize core disciplinary courses. On the other hand, it promotes personalized growth by dismantling rigid disciplinary boundaries and incorporating non-traditional components into curricula. Through minor credit (like 1 credit) allocations, practical elements like social surveys, tutor-student interactions, and non-assessed pedagogical activities are systematically integrated into academic programs. This structure encourages students to diversify their learning approaches and cultivate comprehensive competencies based on personal interests and academic capacity, playing a vital role in nurturing well-rounded professionals equipped for complex societal demands.

### **2.3 Reforming the Assessment Methods**

Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, China's higher education has restructured its assessment methods to prioritize the enhancement of students' comprehensive learning capabilities, establishing a dual-track evaluation framework. Beyond traditional academic performance indicators that focus on knowledge comprehension and mastery, a comprehensive evaluation system has been introduced to quantify students' holistic development. This system tracks moral, intellectual, and physical growth while assessing participation and performance in activities such as student organizations, academic competitions, and public service initiatives, thereby integrating the cultivation of ethical values, practical skills, and social responsibility into formal evaluations. Simultaneously, academic assessments have been refined into two interconnected components: formative assessment and examination scores. Inspired by global top-tier universities, formative assessment evaluates student's performance in regular seminars, presentations, quizzes, and group works, putting emphasis on student's academic engagement, knowledge application, collaborative abilities, and innovative practices beyond traditional rote learning. Examination scores, conversely, focus on student's performance in midterm and final exams, emphasizing memorization and comprehension of knowledge. The relative weighting of these two components adapts to disciplinary characteristics and pedagogical objectives, balancing rigorous academic standards with diversified competency development. This integrated approach reflects China's educational commitment to nurturing well-rounded talents equipped with both specialized expertise and adaptive capacities, effectively bridging theoretical knowledge with real-world competencies.

### **3. GLOBALIZATION HAS A PROFOUND IMPACT ON CHINA'S TALENT TRAINING SYSTEM**

In the globalization context, China's higher education system actively adapts to the globalization pattern, incorporates the worldwide advanced talent training concepts, innovates the talent training model, optimizes the talent training structure, and actively builds a scientific and efficient modern talent training system.

### **3.1 Establishing an International Training Goal**

During the new era of reform and opening-up in the 1980s, China implemented multiple reforms in higher education, increasingly emphasizing the cultivation of globally competitive international talents. This goal is first reflected in the English teaching practices and increasing number of foreign faculty. Chinese universities established English courses as compulsory for all domestic students and recruited foreign teachers to enhance teaching effectiveness. Chinese universities also make efforts to ensure a certain proportion of international students in admissions to promote educational internationalization. Second, Chinese institutions encouraged international academic exchanges by establishing partnerships with overseas universities, providing policy and financial support for initiatives such as international exchange programs, summer camps, and joint doctoral training projects. Finally, universities fostered multicultural interactions through campus cultural festivals and language partnership programs between Chinese and international students, aiming to enhance students' cross-cultural awareness, respect for diversity, and foundational knowledge for cultivating global perspectives, in order to bridge the ethnic and racial between domestic students and oversea students whose issues are often dealt with separately (Zhao and Postiglione, 2008).

### **3.2 Constructing an Integrated Training System for Undergraduates, Masters and Doctors**

In recent years, intensified global competition in cutting-edge technologies has elevated the demand for scientific talent, driving the rising enrollment in master's and doctoral programs. Against this backdrop, Chinese universities adopted the Western concept of "research-oriented degrees", selecting academically outstanding undergraduates with research potential for integrated training. In this context, the integrated "direct PhD program" training system emerged as a product of globalization intersecting with China's higher education reforms. This model merges the traditional three-year master's and four-year doctoral programs into a streamlined five-year "bachelor-doctoral degree" development path, enabling students with academic potential to directly participate in scientific research programs after undergraduate studies. Compared to

traditional approaches, this integrated system emphasizes systematic and progressive educational guideline, tailored to individual strengths, and breaks free from rigid academic structures. Through policy support, small-class teaching, research project participation, and full-cycle mentorship, this integrated training system ensures continuous academic development and strengthens disciplinary foundations, cultivating high-level innovative talent by optimizing the use of research resources. Currently, this model has gained traction in China, particularly in STEM fields, as a key framework for advancing research-oriented talent cultivation.

### **3.3 Implementing the “Application-Review” System for Doctoral Admissions**

Aligned with the global trend of internationalization in advanced degree programs, Chinese universities have gradually adopted the Western “application-review” system in higher education system. In 2013, China’s Ministry of Education issued guidelines urging universities to emulate world-class institutions by adopting “Application-Review” in doctoral admissions. To date, over 70 Chinese universities have implemented this system. Unlike the traditional “written exam - interview” approach, the “Application-Review” system shifts focus from exam scores to holistic evaluations. Applicants now submit materials such as personal statements, research proposals, and recommendation letters, enabling universities to assess their knowledge structure, academic background, research potential, intellectual curiosity, innovative thinking, logical reasoning, and communication skills in a larger scope. This comprehensive evaluation ensures the selection of candidates suited for scientific research, enhancing the fairness, rigor, and scientific validity of admissions. By prioritizing multidimensional qualifications over rote knowledge, the system has significantly improved the quality of doctoral candidates, aligning China’s talent selection mechanisms with global standards.

## **4. GLOBALIZATION HAS A PROFOUND IMPACT ON CHINA’S TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEM**

Chinese universities take the initiative to adapt to the profound reforms of globalization. They draw on the successful experience of personnel

reforms in universities around the world in terms of job appointments, title promotions, and evaluation indicators. At the same time, in combination with national conditions and school conditions, Chinese universities have explored a modern teacher evaluation system in line with western teacher evaluation system that has been gradually formed and established over a long period.

### **4.1 Establishing the “Tenure-Track” system**

Against the backdrop of educational modernization, China’s traditional lifelong faculty appointment system increasingly hindered university development. To address this emerging problem, some Chinese universities turned to the globally prevalent “tenure-track” system, which originated in the US and has gained traction among worldwide top-tier universities that aim to build world-class disciplines and faculty teams. By 2025, nearly all Project 985 universities and elite Project 211 universities in China had adopted the “Tenure-Track” system. Central to this system is the “up-or-out” policy, a localized adaptation of the US tenure model, incorporating the tenure-track evaluation into each step of title promotion or in each appointment period of a teacher. Introduced in the late 20th century and gradually refined, this policy requires junior faculty to achieve specific academic ranks within a contractual period to retain their positions. Those failing to meet standards face dismissal, demotion, or reassignment. While this system has broken the rigidity of lifelong appointments, optimized faculty structures and incentivized academic productivity, its implementation has exposed challenges: it stresses an utilitarian focus which risk fostering academic misconduct and distorting scholarly pursuits; the hyper-competition jeopardizes junior faculty’s mental health; the under - developed institutional regulations may threaten legitimate faculty rights. These issues highlight the ongoing need for future systemic refinement.

### **4.2 Introducing Internationalized Indicators into Faculty Evaluation**

Amid educational globalization and the growing influx of international students, Chinese universities are prioritizing the integration of global teaching and research competencies into faculty evaluation frameworks. As part of this effort, leading institutions now mandate at least one year of overseas academic experience or foreign degree

qualifications, emphasizing language proficiency and cross-cultural communication skills. Simultaneously, driven by the raising competition of global university ranking, global academic benchmarks have reshaped disciplinary evaluation criteria in China. In STEM fields, SCI-indexed publications and international conference presentations dominate assessment processes, overshadowing domestic journals and forums. Humanities and social sciences retain a focus on domestic research but increasingly value overseas academic engagements as supplementary indicators. Notably, China's higher education system has adopted peer review mechanisms inspired by Western academia, blending them with the localized "representative achievements" evaluation model in many Chinese universities. This hybrid approach fosters collaboration with both domestic and international academic communities, aiming to ensure research quality while enhancing global recognition of scholarly outputs.

#### **4.3 Creating "Teaching-Focused Professor" Positions**

Chinese universities are reforming faculty evaluation systems by establishing dedicated "Teaching-Focused Professor" positions, a strategic response to global higher education trends emphasizing teaching-research balance. "Teaching-Focused Professor" positions prioritize adequate teaching workloads to address large student populations and intensive course demands in China, while shifting evaluation criteria toward practice-oriented metrics such as curriculum development and innovation, textbook compilation, teaching competition achievements, and student mentorship -- deliberately reducing reliance on rigid research quotas. In parallel, this initiative creates diverse career pathways, particularly benefiting early-career faculty holding only master's degrees with limited research experience, by offering them specialized professional development opportunities. This reform not only incentivizes pedagogical engagement but also addresses long-standing imbalance in faculty capacity due to early teacher appointment policies in China, thus serving as a dual-purpose solution to globalization-driven pressures for academic competitiveness and innovation. By redefining traditional academic roles, China aims to cultivate a more balanced and globally competitive higher education ecosystem that harmonizes institutional strengths with international standards.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The impact of globalization on China's higher education is evident in its comprehensive adoption of Western university experiences. This is reflected in the reform of curriculum settings, the credit systems, and the reform of examination methods, as well as in the transformation of the talent cultivation system and the faculty evaluation system. These changes have been driven by China's national need to adapt to the globalized environment and to improve the effectiveness of education as well as the cultivation of modern professional talents. At present, there are still significant differences in the extent of internationalization among key universities and local colleges, public universities and private institutions, universities in the eastern region and those in the western region in China, etc. (Cai, 2016). Therefore, enhancing the internationalization level of Chinese universities will be a long-term issue that China's higher education system needs to focus on in the globalization age.

Overall, China has actively adapted to the trend of globalization and reformed its higher education system over the past century. Today, the China's higher education system had become the largest higher education system all over the world in terms of scale (Rui, 2015). In recent years, China's rapid national development, particularly in high-tech fields, has been closely related to the national strategy of "rejuvenating the country through science and education" and the reform of higher education systems. The emergence of a series of talents and China's internationally leading accomplishments in certain technological fields demonstrate that the impact of globalization on China's higher education has proved to be mainly positive. However, it is also important to recognize that there are still issues such as formalism and nepotism in the educational process and the inability to implement reforms effectively.

In the context of globalization, it could be projected that mutual reference between Western and Chinese educational systems is an inevitable trend in alignment with increasing global communication in the information age. The dynamics in the international education field will serve as "multipliers and magnifiers of differences" especially in higher education (Hershock 2010). In future research, it is necessary to explore more deeply the different manifestations and impacts of higher education systems in China and the West.

This will help us to further understand the fundamental mechanisms of education and reflect on the relationship between education and different national conditions, ideologies and policies.

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