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In 2017, Chinese government launched a massive higher education initiative targeting at developing selected universities and disciplines into the world first-class universities as well as first-class disciplines in the world (abbreviated as the “Double First Class” initiative). The initiative was an ambitious higher education project following the existing “985” and “211” key projects.

After two years of wide discussions and deliberations, in January 2017, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, and National Development and Reform Commission jointly released a document titled as “Implementation measures to coordinate development of World First-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines Construction (tentative)”. The document specifies the goals of future development, and details selection criteria, procedures, supporting schemes, and strategies of management and implementation.

By 2020, a number of universities and a group of disciplines will meet the world-class standards, and a number of disciplines will be in leading positions. By 2030, more universities and disciplines will be enlisted in the world-class category, and a number of universities will be among the best worldwide and China will be in the leading position in more disciplines. The overall strength of higher education will be substantially increased. By the middle of the century, the number and strength of the first-class universities and disciplines will be in the leading position in the world. This solid foundation will transform China into a strong power in higher education. (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, & National Development and Reform Commission, 2017a)

In September 2017, a list of the universities and disciplines was released¹. A total number of 42 universities were selected as in the world first-class universities initiatives; among them, 36 were in the category A and 6 in the category B. A total of 95 universities were identified under the first-class disciplines initiative (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, & National Development and Reform Commission, 2017b). In total, 137 universities met the criteria of the “Double First Class” initiative, accounting for 4.7% of 2,914 universities in China. Among the 42 nominated universities under the world-class initiative, 33 are affiliated to

the Ministry of Education, four to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and one to the Chinese Academy of Sciences. There is only one military university and three provincial universities included in the initiative.

1 Policy Features of the “Double First Class” Initiative

By scrutinizing the list of the selected universities, selection criteria, and administrative measures in use, policy features of the initiative are identified as follows:

1.1 Cumulative Effects of Previous Projects

The selected first-class universities are characterized by their undergoing long-term construction, advanced education philosophy, substantial academic strength, and high level of social recognition. The chosen universities must own a number of nationally and internationally leading disciplines, and have highly visible performance in education reform, innovation and building modern universities. Despite of the favorable regional layout consideration for Zhengzhou University in the central China, Yunnan University and Xinjiang University in the west, the enlisted universities under the initiative are virtually those bearing cumulative advantages from the previous “985” project.

1.2 Call for Meeting the National Strategic Needs and Advancing the International Cutting-Edge Science and Technology

The selection criteria aiming at serving the key national strategies emphasized close connections with industrial development, social needs, and the cutting-edge science and technology. As a result, Engineering and Natural Sciences are the most benefited research fields under the initiative. Material Science and Engineering, Chemistry, and Biology were the top three favored disciplines with 30, 25, and 16 universities enlisted respectively under the first-class disciplines initiative. Mathematics and Computer Science and Technology were the next two blessed disciplines, each with 14 selected universities.

1.3 Favorable Consideration towards Certain Disciplines with Chinese Characteristics

From the perspective of the national strategy, development of the “Double First Class” initiative adheres to Chinese characteristics, supporting strong disciplines while nurturing those of special needs, e.g., Marxism Studies and Chinese Traditional

Medicine. These two disciplines are of outstanding features, irreplaceable, and urgently needed in the national development. They were not suitable for international comparison through the third-party evaluations. There are six universities with Marxism Studies and six with Chinese Traditional Medicine included in the initiative.

1.4 Uneven Regional Distribution of Selected Universities and Disciplines

The selection criteria of the initiative were based on merits rather than on bottom-line qualifications, prioritizing efficiency while taking fairness into account. In Beijing, Shanghai, and Jiangsu, 153, 57, and 43 disciplines were selected respectively. Such regional distribution is similar to the distribution in previous key initiatives. Beijing and the Eastern area retain their clear advantage; universities in regions such as Hebei and Shanxi were less favored. Some universities in the Western area were favored because of the designated and biased support of the policy.

1.5 Guiding Administrative Principles of Total Quantity Limit, Open Competition, and Dynamic Adjustment

Running on a 5-year cycle, the initiative aims to break labelling effect, and objectively formulate reasonable criteria of selection and performance evaluation. Assessments are implemented in the early, middle, and final terms of the project. Dynamic adjustment is employed to regulate the funding and the number of the selected disciplines. Therefore, the selected universities and disciplines are subject to funding reduction or even elimination in the next round if their performance is evaluated poor. Conversely, those unselected in the first round will have opportunities to become enrolled in the initiative if they improve.

2 The “Double First Class” Initiative as Part of the National Strategy

For the past 20 years, global competition in higher education has been extraordinarily fierce. Higher education is an essential driving force of a nation’s economy; therefore, governments worldwide have concentrated unprecedented attention on higher education, pouring tremendous resources into Bioengineering, Information Technology, and several other fundamental areas of research, hoping that the contribution of higher education to the economy could be increased (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). This tactic is particularly crucial for developing countries, which display their economic competence through the number of world-class universities they have. Therefore, establishing world-class research universities is regarded as an investment to the future of the nation (Rhoads, Li, & Ilano, 2014). Many countries in Asia and Latin America have formulated policies to elevate their

universities to the world-class status. However, for universities in the developing countries, establishing a high-quality education system of world-class universities in a short period of time is highly challenging (Lee, 2013). To address this challenging task, Chinese government adopted a frequently applied strategy, i.e., to drive systemic development of higher education through a top-down plan.

A master development plan for higher education is a comprehensive configuration to incorporate higher education in the overall national development strategy, driven by a series of resource allocation policies. Therefore, the “Double First Class” initiative does not only consider the development of higher education itself, but also coheres with the overall strategy of national development, and dynamically adjusts to the strategies implemented in the economic and social sectors.

3 Possible Challenges to the “Double First Class” Initiative

In order to synchronize educational and social development, Chinese government proposed to push a group of high quality universities to enter the world first-class group by driving institutional reforms and leveraging performance. However, there is an inconvenient reality lying behind the blueprint of the initiative.

3.1 Ambiguous Definition under Ambitious Goals

How world-class universities and disciplines should be defined is unclear. To the general public, various rankings help identify “the first-class” ones. But every ranking system has its own limitations. Some researchers suggested several essential indicators such as concentrated academic research, visible international reputation, solid financial foundation, and attraction to talents (Salmi, 2009; Rodriguez-Pomeda, & Casani, 2016). However, these measures still cannot precisely define “the first-class”. Furthermore, “the first class” is a nebulous label; an ambiguous concept that can be arbitrarily elaborated.

3.2 Excessive Resource Concentration in Competition

The foundation of the initiative is discipline, which means that the selection and evaluation criteria are based on academic development of disciplines. Only 12 of the 42 selected as the potential first-class universities have more than 10 disciplines enlisted as the first-class disciplines. Some nominated universities only have one or two outstanding disciplines. In order to increase their competitive advantages, universities would strategically concentrate the limited resources on the existing outstanding disciplines. This may induce fluctuations and the constant adjustment of academic structures in universities, which will cause the instability of disciplinary

structures. Such adjustment is virtually a costly survival game of the fittest among the disciplines within a university, but also may lead to unbalanced academic structure impairing training high quality personnel.

3.3 Tensions between Academic Autonomy and Performance Evaluation

Academic autonomy is the core principle of higher education; this is particularly true for the world-leading research universities. The balance between institutional autonomy and accountability is a complicated issue in the developing countries (Altbach, 2013). The strategic goals, selection criteria, and selection procedures of the initiative have revealed the core values of nationalism. Although the selected universities have begun to announce their construction plans, they are still subject to the achievement expectations of the government.

The “Double First Class” initiative has just begun to be implemented. The problems and challenges discussed herein can only be overcome in the future implementation. The universities and disciplines selected in the first round should exercise more of their academic autonomy, to deepen the reforms of the institutions and mechanisms, and to lead development of a clustered and extended disciplines around their core outstanding disciplines. For those unselected, their key strategies might involve amplifying their advantages and increasing their competitiveness.

Note

- 1 The list of the world-class universities and the first-class disciplines can be retrieved from http://www.moe.edu.cn/srcsite/A22/moe_843/201709/t20170921_314942.html.

Note on Contributor

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