

School Finance: Achieving High Standards With Equity And Efficiency

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Higher Education in China: Access, Equity and Equality

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Introduction

One of the global educational challenges is the increasing demand for higher education often in an environment of scarcity. Nowhere is this truer than in China with a large population and a general recognition that the road to success lies in being admitted to one of its relatively few universities, most of which are located on the coastal or near interior regions of the country.

Since 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, China's leaders have sought to find a "Chinese way to higher education" including such radical efforts as the virtual elimination of conventional higher education during the Cultural Revolution. In general, however, one can say that since 1949 and up until the last few years, two principal goals have been pursued with respect to higher education: ideological training and establishing a narrowly focused technical training program to build socialism (or in earlier ideological jargon, universities were exhorted to be both "red" and "expert"). Policies leading up to the current reform effort are detailed well elsewhere (Agelasto & Adamson 1998; Hayhoe 1999). In understanding China's current efforts to transform higher education, it will be useful to provide a brief history of policies leading up to the current effort: the Draft Law on Higher Education (hereafter—Draft Law).¹ This will be a broad-brush overview to bring the reader up to date on current reform efforts and some of the challenges Chinese leaders face as a result of the reforms.

Although the Draft Law is only now being seriously implemented, it has a long history dating back to 1985 (cited in the ten-year plan of 1991 as a means to realign higher education with new economic directions). The initial draft began in 1985 when the State Education Commission (SEC; now the Ministry of Education), sought to rationalize the legal foundations of China's higher education system. Prior to 1985, there had been a plethora of decrees, regulations, and provisions issued by the central authorities in an effort to bring some order to China's quilt-like pattern of higher education. These documents lacked coherence, authority, and systemization; there was no basic legal framework to guide higher education.

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