

Abstract

During the past 25 years, China's elite higher education system has been systematically developed and supported by constructive projects, such as Project 211 & 985, C9 League, and the Double First-Class Plan. China's elite universities have also proliferated during this process, and some of them are already rated among the world's top universities. This article gives a general introduction to China's elite higher education projects.

China's Elite Tertiary Education

Guo Congbin

Many students set their hopes on an Ivy League education, though only a handful are ever likely to realize their dreams because of the highly competitive nature of these universities. In China, the Ivy League equivalent is universities ranked in "Project 211," "Project 985," and the latest upgrade, "Double First-Class Plan."

Project 211 & 985

In the early 1990s, China laid down a national strategy of "rejuvenating the country through science and education." Project 211 was launched in 1995, setting a visionary goal of developing approximately 100 higher education institutions and critical disciplines by the turn of the century. The funds required for establishing Project 211 came from the state, departments, localities, and the higher education institutions themselves. Disciplines of vital national value were developed in priority, and infrastructures at the selected institutions were provided for as well.

Following the positive outcome of Project 211, the central government set a higher goal for higher education—Project 985. The project got its name during its launch in May 1998, at the centennial anniversary of Peking University. From 1999 to 2013, Project 985 was carried out in three phases, of which the first was 1999–2002, with a transition phase in 2003; the second 2004–2008, with a transition phase in 2009; and the third 2010–2013. It is noteworthy that no specific descriptions or guidelines were made public as to how a university could be selected for Project 985. In the first phase, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, and some others were selected as the first batch of Project 985, followed by Wuhan University, Xiamen University, Sun Yat-sen University, Nankai University, and others as the second batch. In the second phase, China Agricultural University, Central University for Nationalities, and East China Normal University entered the ranks of the Project 985 universities. Generally speaking, the sooner universities and colleges joined Project 985, the more financial support they received. Project 211 & 985 delivered some remarkable outcomes. Within two decades, it promoted the rapid development of Chinese universities as institutions, and of specific disciplines. As a result, China has now become the second leading nation after the United States in terms of global scientific publications, including in Science Citation Index (SCI), Engineering Index (EI), and Conference Proceedings Citation Index—Science (CPCI-S). Moreover, in the decade after 1995, the number of teaching staff and students increased considerably, and universities situated in remote and underdeveloped areas succeeded in attracting more talent.

C9 League

Nine presidents from Project 985 universities held the first First-Class University Construction Seminar in 2003, during which the C9 League was established. The C9 League includes Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, the University of Science and Technology of China, Harbin Institute of Technology, and Xi'an Jiaotong University. It stands for the leading segment of China's tertiary education system. The ministry of education and the ministry of finance have dedicated significant funding to C9 League universities to turn them into world-class universities by reforming their institutional governance, strengthening their research platforms, and promoting international exchange and cooperation. C9 League universities received about half of the total funding of Project 985 in each of its stages. Peking University and Tsinghua University received the equivalent of approximately US\$250 million for Project 985 during the first stage, about the same amount in the second stage, and an increase to about US\$375 million in the third stage. Besides, in 2009, these universities signed an agreement on "Cooperation and Exchange of Elites between First-Class Universities" to share academic resources and cultivate top students.

Under this agreement, they can exchange undergraduate and postgraduate students, host C9–Summer Schools for brand effect and to attract talented students, and establish collaborative web repositories to share academic resources and review dissertations.

The result has been remarkable. In terms of global rankings, the mainland Chinese universities that entered the top 200 of QS World University Ranking from 2012 to 2019 and the top 200 of *THE* World University Rankings from 2018 to 2019 were all C9 League universities. In the QS rankings, Peking University and Tsinghua University in particular went up from #46 and #47 respectively in 2012 to #41 and #25 in 2015, and continued to improve to #30 and #17 in 2019. In the *THE* rankings, the trend was the same for Peking University and Tsinghua University, from #49 and #71 in 2012 to #42 and #47 in 2015 respectively. In 2019, the two universities reached #31 and #22.

Double First-Class Plan

After the end of Project 985 in 2013 and a three-year transition period from 2014 to 2016, China launched its latest strategy in 2017, the “Double First-Class Plan” (DFP), with the intention of establishing a large number of world-class universities and disciplines by the end of 2050. There are currently 137 DFP entities, of which 42 are first-class universities, and 95 are first-class disciplines. DFP universities are more evenly distributed geographically than Project 985 universities. From the original Project 985 universities, Zhengzhou University in the central plains region, Yunnan University in the southwest region, and Xinjiang University in the northwest region were selected as DFP universities. To a certain extent, this compensated for the insufficiency of the original Project 985 in terms of colleges and universities from the central and western regions. The DFP selection process is more transparent, with the establishment of a council and the participation of third parties. Furthermore, it is a competitive mechanism that takes into consideration the universities’ performance in recent years. DFP universities are divided into Class A and Class B as an encouragement to carry on with improvement measures.

The DFP has now become an essential reference for the government and for enterprises and universities to locate talents. Compared to Project 985 & 211, the DFP has changed the mode of resource investment and the management system. It is shifting the resource investment mode from being government-oriented to becoming more diversified. It also tries to create a management system that is built together by the government, the universities, social organizations, the public, and third parties, to allow the market to gradually drive resource allocation to higher education. In other words, the government wants to change its role from decision-maker to coordinator, and to create a fairer environment to promote the universities’ market competitiveness. Besides, the DFP implements a dynamic management rolling budget system, to regularly monitor and evaluate the efficiency of how the funding is used, internally and externally. Finally, rather than being equally distributed like before, the DFP investment is preferentially allocated to colleges and disciplines with high standards and distinctive characteristics, to develop advantageous disciplines and strengthen disciplines required by emerging industries and national strategy.

Along the Path of Progress, Does Money Matter?

Back in 1995, when Project 211 was launched, China’s fiscal revenue was about US\$75.2 billion. Fast-forwarding to 2017 when the DFP was established, this amount skyrocketed to about US\$2.69 trillion. While the total budget estimate of top universities is a complicated figure to approximate, the proportion of funding dedicated to education has considerably increased. This is remarkable, as just seven decades ago, four-fifths of the population was impoverished and illiterate.

While the financial situation has improved significantly, China’s higher education still has some issues that need to be resolved. The management of the university funding system needs to be streamlined, for instance by simplifying the application process and evaluation procedure, granting researchers more decision-making rights and a more relaxed research environment to choose and adjust research approaches, giving them ownership of, or full right to use research results, and so on. Although universities in China are no longer suffering from extreme budget shortages, increased autonomy in the use of funds for researchers will stimulate their sense of initiative and innovation. ▲

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