

From a Catching Mode to a Leading Mode? Understanding the Policy Changes in China's Higher Education in 2024

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Suggested citation: Li, X., Liu, B., & Li, Z. (2025). From a Catching Mode to a Leading Mode? Understanding the Policy Changes in China's Higher Education in 2024. *Journal of Research and Innovation in Higher Education*, 6(1), 142-165.

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Abstract

China's higher education sector has undergone a profound transformation. In 2024, the Chinese government introduced a series of policy reforms in response to intensifying international technological competition as well as significant domestic structural changes in the industry. These reforms focused on restructuring undergraduate programmes, enhancing the quality of doctoral education, and empowering the teaching profession. This paper examines those changes and explores some of the associated risks and opportunities. By understanding these recent policy changes, we gain insights into the ways in which China aspires to become a global leader in higher education.

Keywords: China, Higher Education, Policy Changes, Technological Competition, Industrial Restructuring, Innovation and Creativity.

Introduction

Overview of higher education changes in China

China, a country of 1.4 billion people, has quickly and recently expanded its higher education system to match the demands of its expanding economy and aspirations to become a worldwide powerhouse. The country made investments in higher education during the 1990s, as reflected by the approximately 40 million students enrolled annually at more than 3,000 institutions (Textor, 2024). China's higher education institutions (HEIs) are governed centrally by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and function in a hierarchical manner. The emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields is in line with national development objectives.

In 1949, the country had only 205 HEIs, with a total enrolment of 117,000 students, and the gross enrolment rate for undergraduates was a mere 0.26% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). By 2023, this landscape had changed dramatically: the number of HEIs surged to 3,074, marking a 14-fold increase from that in 1949. Total enrolment across all levels of higher education reached 47.63 million, reflecting 406-fold growth. The gross enrolment rate for undergraduates climbed to 60.2%, representing a 59.9 percentage point

increase since 1949 (MOE, 2023). China's higher education has now entered a phase of universalisation.

During the expansion of higher education at various levels, there has also been a notable increase in postgraduate education. The main periods of expansion at the postgraduate level occurred in 2003, 2009, and 2017. In 2003, to address the challenge of increased competition in the job market due to the first wave of higher education expansion and the recruitment freezes caused by the SARS outbreak, the government sought to increase postgraduate enrolment by 27.7%, adding 624,000 students. In 2009, the MOE increased enrolment for master's and doctoral programmes by 5% and 1.7%, respectively, while adding 50,000 positions for professional postgraduate students. Finally, in 2017, a unified master's degree entrance examination was introduced for both full-time and part-time postgraduate students under new policy guidelines, which provided greater opportunities for the development of part-time master's education programmes (Huang et al., 2022).

In addition to those developments in the scale of higher education, the disciplinary structure has undergone significant changes. Like most other countries, China has classified academic disciplines into two broad categories: "liberal arts" and "sciences". The liberal arts include fields such as literature, history, philosophy, economics, law, education, management, and the arts, whereas the sciences encompass fields such as the natural sciences, engineering, agriculture, and medicine. At the undergraduate level, the distribution of graduates between liberal arts and sciences has shifted over time. In 1997, before the expansion of higher education, 31.2% of graduates were from liberal arts disciplines, whereas 68.8% were from the sciences. In 2006, these percentages shifted to 47.0% for the liberal arts and 53.0% for the sciences. By 2021, the proportion of liberal arts graduates had increased further to 51.9%, surpassing that of science graduates, which accounted for 48.1% of all graduates (Gao & Zheng, 2022). This comparison suggests that the current distribution between liberal arts and sciences at the undergraduate level is approximately 1:1, with a growing trend of a relatively higher proportion of liberal arts graduates.

Context and recent developments leading to 2024

In recent years, competition between countries has become increasingly intense,

particularly in the field of international technology. Some countries, led by the United States (U.S.), have implemented a series of restrictive policies targeting China. For example, in 2017, the U.S. government publicly stated in its National Security Strategy that it would limit student visas for STEM fields. During the first Trump administration, the U.S. pursued a comprehensive decoupling strategy with China, which affected not only traditional trade and economic relations but also cultural exchanges and scientific cooperation (Dollar, 2022). Under President Biden, the U.S. shifted from a “comprehensive decoupling” approach to a more targeted “technology+” approach, with a focus on precise decoupling in the technology sector.

Domestically, China’s industrial structure is undergoing profound changes. The country’s industrial framework has shifted from a “secondary, tertiary, primary” model to a “tertiary, secondary, primary” structure, with the service sector becoming the dominant driver of the national economy. By 2020, the added value of the tertiary sector (service) accounted for 53.95% of GDP, while the share of the primary (agriculture) and secondary (industry) sectors had declined (Luan et al., 2021). However, within the secondary sector, structural optimisation is taking place, with energy-intensive and highly polluting industries being gradually phased out, while high-tech industries are expanding both in scale and scope.

Structural transformations have created an urgent need for cultivating high-level talent and advancing scientific research. In response to this demand, the Chinese government introduced a series of policies in 2024 (see Table 1), with three primary foci: restructuring undergraduate programmes, enhancing the quality of doctoral education, and strengthening the teaching profession.

Table 1: Higher education policies introduced in 2024

Issuer of the policy	Name of the policy	Related policies
Ministry of Education	Notice on Further Improving Undergraduate Programme Management in General Higher Education Institutions ¹	
	Notice from the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation of Undergraduate Programme Setup for General Higher Education Institutions in 2024 ²	
General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council	Central Opinion on Accelerating the High-Quality Development of Doctoral Education ³	Measures for the Administration of the Catalogue of Disciplines and Majors of Graduate Education (2022) ⁴
General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council	Central Opinion on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Development in the New Era ⁵	Overall Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era (2020) ⁶
		Standards for Teachers' Digital Literacy (2022) ⁷

Major Changes in Higher Education in 2024

Change 1: Restructuring Undergraduate Programmes

In March 2024, the MOE in China issued two key policies, namely, the *Notice on Further Improving Undergraduate Programme Management in General Higher Education Institutions* and the *Notice from the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation of Undergraduate Programme Setup for General Higher Education Institutions in 2024*. These policies aim to better align undergraduate programmes with national strategic priorities and critical talent needs, especially the

cultivation of innovative productive forces to serve China's modernisation efforts. The reform focuses on two main aspects:

Mechanism for Updating Undergraduate Programmes

To ensure the alignment of undergraduate programmes with evolving societal and economic needs, the MOE introduced an annual update mechanism for the Undergraduate Programme Catalogue for General Higher Education Institutions (hereafter, the Catalogue). HEIs are now required to adhere to the annually updated Catalogue for undergraduate admissions and programme offerings. HEIs are encouraged to introduce new programmes based on regional development needs and their institutional missions. Proposals for adding or renaming programme categories, or adjusting subdisciplines within existing categories, must be submitted in accordance with the recommendations of the MOE's Teaching Steering Committees and undergo extensive consultation.

Specifically, to create new programmes, HEIs must submit a preliminary application one year in advance as part of their academic development planning. For established programmes, if they have not admitted students or have not enrolled students for five consecutive years, they should be phased out. Additionally, the *Ministry of Education's Notice on Employment and Entrepreneurship for the 2025 Cohort of University Graduates* established a new red–yellow card warning system to help improve the effectiveness of academic disciplines and programmes. This warning system has two functions, one of which is to support the development of emerging and urgently needed disciplines, including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biomedical engineering, to ensure that cutting-edge fields receive the necessary resources and infrastructure to thrive; the other is to identify programmes that are associated with poor employment outcomes and that are thus in need of restructuring or closure.

Development of Disciplines for National Priorities

The policies emphasise the development of disciplines critical to national priorities, which include integrated circuits, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, life sciences, energy, green and low-carbon technologies, international law, global communication, international organisations, and financial technology. HEIs are encouraged to focus on these areas and cultivate talent for national strategic needs.

Among other disciplines, the policies promote the development of New Engineering, New Medicine, New Agriculture, and New Liberal Arts. The term “new” refers to interdisciplinary integration and the creation of new programmes that align with the evolving demands of the economy and society. For example, the New Engineering initiative refers to the development of programmes targeting emerging industries. It builds upon the traditional four core disciplines of information technology (i.e., electronic science and technology, information and communication engineering, control science and engineering, and computer science and technology) while integrating newer disciplines that have emerged in recent decades. These include fields centred on the internet and industrial intelligence, such as big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, blockchain, virtual reality, and intelligent science and technology. This initiative also encompasses engineering disciplines focused on upgrading traditional industries through information technology, smart manufacturing and robotics (Zeng et al., 2024). The New Medicine initiative marks a shift in medical education from a model based primarily on the biomedical sciences to one that emphasises interdisciplinary integration, incorporating the medical humanities, medical engineering, medical theory, and other emerging fields (Gu et al., 2018). The New Agriculture initiative addresses the needs of modern agriculture and rural development by promoting synergies between the agricultural sciences and other disciplines, such as engineering and the social sciences. Similarly, the New Liberal Arts initiative fosters interdisciplinary collaboration within the humanities and between the humanities and STEM fields. Its goal is to cultivate talent with broad interdisciplinary perspectives and innovative capabilities, thus advancing humanities and social sciences education with Chinese characteristics (Cui et al., 2024). These adjustments reflect China’s commitment to aligning undergraduate education with the nation’s strategic priorities, thereby ensuring that higher education serves as a cornerstone for innovation, modernisation and sustainable development.

Change 2: Enhancing Doctoral Education

The overall expansion of higher education has propelled the development of doctoral education in China. In 1978, the first year of resumed postgraduate admissions, only 18 doctoral students were enrolled. By 2022, the number of doctoral students had increased to 139,000. During this period, there were phases of rapid growth (from 1998 to 2004,

with an annual average increase of 20%) and more moderate expansion (from 2005 to 2016, with an annual average increase of approximately 3%). After 2017, following the *Thirteenth Five-Year Plan*, doctoral education entered a phase of accelerated expansion, with doctoral enrolment increasing by approximately 10% annually between 2017 and 2022 (Wu & Liu, 2024).

Despite the expansion of doctoral education, technological and industrial transformations worldwide have created unprecedented demands for high-level, innovative professionals. In China, as the industrial structure has shifted from being labour- and skill-intensive to being technology- and innovation-driven, the demand for high-calibre talent has grown significantly. Concurrently, the intensifying competition between China and the U.S. underscores the urgency of adopting extraordinary measures to expedite this process, thereby supporting China's goal of achieving self-reliance and strengths in science and technology. As the highest tier of the national education system, doctoral education serves as a critical pillar of the country's innovation ecosystem (Resta et al., 2024). Therefore, China is accelerating the development of doctoral education to meet its strategic needs.

In October 2024, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council co-issued the *Opinion on Accelerating the High-Quality Development of Doctoral Education* (hereafter, the *Opinion*). This policy document sets out a comprehensive framework for advancing reforms in doctoral education. The stated goal of this policy is to establish a “world-class doctoral education system with Chinese characteristics” and to turn China into a “globally significant centre for doctoral education” (MOE, 2024a, para.2). To achieve this goal, the *Opinion* outlines targeted strategies in the key areas of academic discipline planning, autonomous talent cultivation, university-industry collaboration, and resource allocation.

Optimising the Disciplinary Structure of Doctoral Education

The current disciplinary structure of doctoral education in China faces notable challenges, particularly in supporting innovation in foundational scientific research and achieving significant breakthroughs in critical technologies. Moreover, it remains insufficient in terms of training urgently needed talent. Disciplines and specialties serve as the foundation for talent training (Li, 2024). To address these concerns, the *Opinion* explicitly

states the need to “optimise the disciplinary structure and establish mechanisms for timely adjustment, development, and alignment of disciplines and specialties to meet national needs” (MOE, 2024a, para. 3). To this end, the Office of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council (2023) further introduced a *Guidance List for the Development of Urgently Needed Disciplines and Specialties*, which operates outside the traditional graduate education disciplinary catalogue. This guidance list emphasises flexibility and innovation. It undergoes annual updates and focuses on priority areas and critical national demands.

The current policy underscores three priority areas for development. First, the STEM, agriculture and medicine disciplines are highlighted as foundational to scientific and technological advancements. More specifically, these fields are seen as critical for driving technological innovation, facilitating industrial restructuring, and strengthening national competitiveness. Second, the policy emphasises emerging fields, such as artificial intelligence, big data, cybersecurity, quantum information, and new energy, which align with global technological frontiers. Third, interdisciplinary fields are prioritised. For example, in 2021, Peking University established doctoral programmes in interdisciplinary areas, including the life sciences, nanoscience and engineering, data science and engineering, and artificial intelligence. Recent initiatives have included integrative fields such as “Medicine + X”, “Digitalization +” and core technologies for achieving carbon neutrality. These developments aim to align doctoral education more closely with national priorities, thereby driving innovation and addressing pressing talent needs across strategic disciplines.

Increasing the Proportion of Professional Doctoral Degrees

Similar to many other countries, doctoral programmes in China have a long tradition of emphasising academic research. This emphasis has now been considered insufficient to meet the demand for the high-level, applied talent required by industrial upgrading and development (Wildy et al., 2015). Professional doctoral degrees, which are emerging as a result of global reforms in doctoral education, are critical for advancing national development strategies and driving economic and social progress. In 2020, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council and the MOE released the *Development Plan for Professional Degree Graduate Education (2020–2025)*, which called for a substantial

increase in professional doctoral programme intake. That same year, the MOE issued the *Measures for the Administration of the Catalogue of Disciplines and Majors of Graduate Education* (2022), aiming to elevate professional degrees to a status equal to that of academic degrees.

These policy guidelines emphasise the importance of diversifying doctoral education by increasing the proportion of professional degree programmes. To this end, key measures include expanding the departments of HEIs authorised to offer professional doctoral degrees and fostering differentiated development between academic and professional doctoral tracks. In 2023, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council approved 831 new doctoral degree authorisation points, which are official approvals granting HEIs the capacity to offer doctoral degrees. Among these, 351 points were allocated to professional doctorates. This expansion marked a shift in China's doctoral education system to align more closely with practical and industrial demands.

Enhancing University–Industry Collaboration

Strengthening university–industry collaboration is another policy measure that aims to promote the high-quality development of doctoral education. China's policies on university–industry cooperation used to focus on vocational education and undergraduate programmes. In recent years, as the demand for high-level technical talent has grown, the MOE has placed greater emphasis on extending industry collaboration to doctoral training. On September 27, 2022, the MOE and the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission jointly held a meeting that positioned university–industry collaboration in doctoral education as crucial to meet the demand for high-level applied talent in an innovation-driven economy (MOE, 2022). Nonetheless, challenges remain, including underdeveloped operational mechanisms and insufficient corporate engagement in doctoral-level collaborations.

The *Opinion* proposes restructuring collaborative mechanisms to integrate education, talent, industry, and innovation. Specific directives focus on three areas: integrating science and education, fostering university–industry synergy, and empowering regional innovation. To promote science–education integration, new collaborative mechanisms for

doctoral training have been proposed, such as shared resources, dual appointments for supervisors, joint enrolment, codeveloped courses, and dual-degree programmes.

To foster university–industry synergy, the *Opinion* advocates embedding high-quality industrial resources into the entire doctoral training process, facilitating the joint cultivation of interdisciplinary talent by HEIs and industries. For example, the University of Science and Technology of China collaborates with leading technology firms to train doctoral candidates in specialised fields such as cybersecurity, critical software, nuclear science, and advanced materials. Similarly, Xi’an Jiaotong University leverages the Western China Science and Technology Innovation Harbor to align doctoral education with national and corporate R&D priorities.

To empower regional innovation, the *Opinion* encourages local governments to adopt incentive policies that promote deeper corporate involvement in doctoral education. In September 2024, China established its first National Regional Technology Transfer and Transformation Center in Jiangsu Province. This initiative involves 20 HEIs partnering with industries such as biopharmaceuticals, information technology, and advanced materials, aiming to support both national strategies and regional development.

In sum, these reforms aim to build a high-quality doctoral education system that addresses national strategic needs while contributing to global academic and technological progress.

Change 3: Empowering the Teaching Profession

The expansion of higher education in China has been accompanied by a steady increase in the number of full-time faculty members, reaching 2.07 million in 2023 (MOE, 2024b). China has placed growing emphasis on empowering the teaching profession in higher education. *The Central Opinion on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Development in the New Era (2018)*, which was jointly issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, marked the first major policy document dedicated to teacher workforce development since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Six years later, the *Central Opinion on Promoting the Spirit of Educators and Strengthening the Development of a High-Quality, Professional Teaching Force in the New Era (2024, hereafter the Opinion)* emerged as the second landmark

policy. The “spirit of educators” embodies the ethical and professional ethos of exemplary educators, characterised by an unwavering commitment to educational ideals, moral integrity, pedagogical innovation, and a profound sense of responsibility in nurturing students (Weijing & Yao, 2024). Below are key initiatives introduced by the *Opinion* to advance this vision.

Cultivating Elevated Professional Ethics in Teaching

While professional ethics in teaching is a universal concept, China’s framework uniquely integrates traditional moral values, such as compassion for students, scholarly rigour, and virtuous conduct (He et al., 2010; Ye et al., 2004), with modern ideological priorities, such as political steadfastness, pedagogical integrity, and virtue-centred education (He et al., 2010; Hu, 2003). The *Opinion* outlines three strategies to strengthen ethical standards.

First, professional ethics is prioritised as the foremost criterion. HEIs should embed professional ethics requirements into faculty employment contracts and enforce rigorous evaluations. Ethical conduct should serve as a foundational criterion for teacher qualification assessments, recruitment, promotions, doctoral supervisor appointments, awards, and research project approvals. Additionally, education authorities should integrate ethical standards into governance mechanisms, linking them to educational supervision, talent programme selection, teaching evaluations, and degree authorisation processes.

Second, professional ethics training should be enhanced. HEIs should incorporate the “spirit of educators” and professional ethics into teacher education curricula and training programmes. Key measures include developing specialised instructional materials on this ethos, leveraging national digital platforms for ethics training, and designing immersive programmes such as revolutionary history education, sociocultural fieldwork, and community engagement initiatives. These efforts aim to ensure that teachers internalise ethical principles through both theoretical study and practical experience.

Third, accountability and disciplinary enforcement should be strengthened. HEIs must rigorously enforce penalties for ethical violations, particularly in cases of severe misconduct that provoke public outcry or societal harm. A teacher qualification inquiry

system should be established to bar individuals with ethical breaches from continuing in the profession. Furthermore, professional ethics compliance should be incorporated into routine institutional inspections, with strict accountability measures to ensure that HEIs and educators uphold their responsibilities.

Enhancing Faculty Professional Competence

Compared with primary and secondary school teachers, faculty professional competence is a more complex concept that encompasses not only teaching ability but also research and social service capabilities. In China, there has been a tendency to prioritise faculty research output while undervaluing their teaching ability (Gu & Levin, 2021). The *Opinion* aims to counterbalance this bias and adapt to external socioeconomic changes by incorporating digital literacy into the development of faculty professional competence.

First, disciplinary expertise forms the cornerstone of faculty professional competence (Van Dijk et al., 2023). HEIs must prioritise advancing teachers' disciplinary knowledge and capabilities as a core element of academic development. Faculty should be encouraged to engage with cutting-edge research and adopt innovative teaching methodologies, aligning with China's Double First-Class initiative (launched in 2017), which identifies faculty expertise as critical to building world-class disciplines. Disciplinary mastery of core knowledge, cognitive frameworks, and research methodologies should be promoted. Faculty are expected to integrate disciplinary thinking into their teaching and research, refine their knowledge structures, and cultivate a holistic understanding of their field's internal logic and evolution (Wang & Biligetu, 2014). HEIs must also adapt to emerging academic trends by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and supporting faculty engagement in foundational, emerging, and cross-disciplinary fields. Simultaneously, institutions should nurture leading academic talent to drive disciplinary progress.

Second, teaching competence should be strengthened through targeted initiatives. Teaching competence is a vital dimension of faculty professional expertise and requires systematic development. HEIs should establish comprehensive faculty support systems, including domestic and international academic exchanges, visiting scholar programmes, and global collaborative opportunities. Ongoing initiatives such as the "Demonstration

Training Project for Young Teachers” and the “Higher Vocational Teachers’ Teaching Innovation Team Building Project” should be expanded. To incentivise pedagogical growth, the integration of professional development credits into faculty evaluation systems should be explored. Additionally, the policy highlights the need to expand postdoctoral training programmes, thus positioning postdoctoral researchers as a strategic talent pool for future faculty recruitment.

Third, faculty should be empowered through digital literacy. With digital technologies becoming increasingly integrated into higher education, the *Opinion* emphasises equipping faculty with advanced digital skills. In 2022, China’s MOE introduced the Standards for Teachers’ Digital Literacy, which defines five core competencies: digital awareness, technical knowledge and skills, digital application, digital social responsibility, and continuous professional development. Building on this framework, the MOE has launched specialised online training programmes targeting mid- and early-career faculty. These programmes combine structured modules, thematic discussions, reflective assessments, and hands-on teaching practice. Participants engage in self-paced learning within an organised digital platform, with completed coursework counting towards continuing education requirements.

Fourth, faculty evaluation systems are pivotal for shaping professional growth and institutional priorities. Faculty in China are deeply entrenched in the dilemma of “involution.” The primary factor driving young university faculty into this predicament is a quantitatively driven evaluation system dominated by administrative logic, where value is defined by numerical metrics. This system prioritises research output over research quality and teaching achievements, creating an imbalance in performance assessment (Wang, 2024). The *Opinion* advocates reforming assessment practices by prioritising teaching effectiveness and research contributions over traditional metrics such as academic credentials, publication volume, or institutional prestige. This approach aligns with the *Overall Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era* (2020), which mandates that faculty assessments emphasise academic contributions, societal impact, and student development outcomes. The *Opinion* further underscores teaching quality as a central criterion, stipulating that promotions and appointments for

high-calibre faculty should reflect their dedication to teaching and student mentorship rather than exclusively to research output or external funding.

Fostering a Societal Culture of Respect for the Teaching Profession

Societal attitudes towards teachers play a vital role in shaping their professional status, job satisfaction, and, by extension, the overall quality of education. Historically, the Chinese nation has maintained a strong tradition of respecting teachers and prioritising education, which has served as a crucial foundation for the development of Chinese culture and the evolution of its educational system (Zhao & Yuan, 2023). The *Opinion* underscores the imperative to strengthen recognition and reward mechanisms for educators who demonstrate outstanding contributions.

China's national awards for higher education faculty recognise excellence across three dimensions: teaching, research, and societal impact. Notable accolades include the National Model Teacher and National Excellent Teacher Awards, which recognise exemplary teaching ethics and pedagogical innovation; the National Teaching Achievement Award and the Ten Thousand Talents Programme – Teaching Master Award, which celebrate transformative instructional contributions; the Changjiang Scholars Programme and the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars, which acknowledge pioneering research leadership; and the Huang Danian-style Faculty Team Initiative, which honours teams that integrate teaching, research, and industry collaboration while emphasising both professional competence and ethical commitment. Provincial governments complete these national efforts with region-specific awards, such as Shaanxi Province's Special Support Plan for Teaching Masters and Sichuan Province's Tianfu Qingcheng Plan for Leading Educational Talent, which are tailored to address local educational priorities.

In addition to formal awards, China has prioritised initiatives to enhance the public image of educators. These efforts include promoting scholarship on the “spirit of educators” to advance discourse on teacher professionalism and ethics; commissioning artistic works that celebrate educators, such as the 2024 documentary series *Great Educators: Biographies of Chinese Education Masters*, which highlights luminaries such as Gu Mingyuan and Pan Maoyuan; leveraging platforms such as the Microeducation WeChat

account to amplify narratives celebrating teachers' contributions; and promoting collaborations between the MOE and institutions such as the National Art Museum of China to curate exhibitions and sculptural tributes honouring educators' legacies. Moreover, the policy emphasises the need to guide media discourse on education-related issues, enhancing oversight to ensure balanced, respectful coverage that reinforces societal appreciation for the profession.

China's 2024 Higher Education Reforms: Opportunities and Risks

In 2024, China launched ambitious reforms to increase its global standing in higher education. These reforms target three strategic areas: adjusting undergraduate programmes, expanding doctoral education, and empowering the teaching profession. Collectively, they aim to position China as a global leader in higher education by aligning its educational system with national priorities and international aspirations. The MOE (2024a, para.2) articulates a vision to “build a world-class doctoral education system with Chinese characteristics” and establish a “globally significant centre for doctoral education”, thereby supporting China's goal of becoming a modern socialist innovation hub. Strengthening the teaching workforce is framed as the “most important foundational work” in this transformative agenda (Government of China, 2024, para.1).

From follower to leader: China's evolving strategy

Since the Reform and Opening-Up in 1978, China has largely emulated Western higher education models, particularly those of the U.S. and Europe. However, bolstered by geopolitical confidence and domestic advancements, it now seeks to transition from learner to leader, reshaping global education norms through a distinctly Chinese approach. This strategy emphasises two pillars. The first is alignment with national priorities. Reforms prioritise cultivating talent to meet China's socioeconomic and technological needs. Adjustments to undergraduate programmes and doctoral education aim to align academic outputs with innovation-driven goals, moving beyond imitation to strategic specialisation. The second is cultural and ethical integration. Higher education is positioned as a vehicle for cultural inheritance and value cultivation. Policies to empower the teaching profession emphasise nurturing educators who embody traditional Chinese ethics, such as moral integrity, public service commitment, and pedagogical wisdom, while fostering cultural identity and national consciousness (MOE, 2024).

Identification and impact of potential risks

Despite its ambitions, China faces significant obstacles in realising its leadership aspirations. The first obstacle entails structural tensions between control and autonomy. The reforms are heavily government driven, reflecting centralised control over curricular adjustments, doctoral expansion, and teacher empowerment. Critics argue that excessive state oversight, hierarchical structures, and limited academic freedom may stifle innovation—a cornerstone of global leadership. As Daly (2015) notes, modernisation's technological and economic values are inseparable from the political systems that enable them. China's ability to reconcile ideological control with intellectual autonomy will determine its capacity to lead.

The second obstacle is the balancing of stakeholder interests. Reforms require collaboration among the government, the market, and societal stakeholders. Moving beyond top-down governance, HEIs must navigate governmental priorities while fostering international collaboration and academic independence. Success hinges on creating a system that harmonises national objectives with global academic trends (Van Der Wende et al., 2016).

Finally, there is concern about an overemphasis on STEM at the expense of the social sciences and humanities. The 2024 reforms prioritise STEM disciplines to advance technological innovation, risking the marginalisation of social sciences and humanities. This imbalance could hinder Chinese HEIs' ability to function as comprehensive institutions within global alliances and limit their progress in interdisciplinary research—which is critical for addressing complex challenges such as climate change and public health.

Lessons Learned

In this paper, we have reviewed the major changes in policy to transform the higher education system in China in 2024. These recent developments reflect the aspiration of China becoming a world focus for innovation and creativity. In the post-industrial society and/or information age, such decisions are important to be made centrally in order for HEIs to function more effectively. However, by reviewing the changes, we also identify the inherent dilemma and implementation challenges, including, for example, the

allocation of resources in higher education by committees may create the situation where universities and the individuals within are restricted to pursue their own interests and development, as well as the emphasis on a code of practice for teachers in higher education that maintains ethical standards. That creates the tension between structural and individual factors. In his paper, Capano (1996) had highlighted the relationship between the two and suggested that the macro-factors shape the context of micro-behaviour, restricting the alternative of choice, but the choice itself is a matter of actors. In this regard, it is essential to inject enabling space and empowerment into the system.

Despite the limits to free will, it is still worth considering the three defining features of China's socialist governance system: i) the policy mobilisation capacity inherent in a state-party structure allows structural reforms to overcome resistance from entrenched interest groups; ii) the nested relationship between the bureaucratic hierarchy and the academic system enables precise planning of human capital through policy instruments; and iii) the centralised decision-making structure facilitates nationwide strategic coordination, allowing education reforms to be pursued with high-level coherence and alignment (Wen & Marginson, 2023). In contrast, in countries with more decentralised systems, such as the U.S., similar reforms often struggle to take root due to fragmented governance and difficulty in building consensus. This comparison underscores the critical role of domestic institutional conditions in shaping policy feasibility and design. Effective educational reforms thus require a closer alignment between policy ambitions and the internal dynamics of national governance structures.

The second lesson is about recognising that while China aspires to become a global leader in higher education, the passage to it depends on how its purpose and achievements are perceived by others. Status is socially constructed and depends on agreement among the relevant actors in a larger social system (Washington and Zajac, 2005). In this case, while it may be sensible for China to strive to improve its status and reputation, as reflected in the overarching objectives, such as, “building China into an education powerhouse” (MOE, 2024c, para. 1; 2024d, para. 1), “developing a world-class doctoral education system with Chinese characteristics”, and “establishing a major global hub for talent and innovation” (MOE, 2024a, para. 2), it should also develop an understanding of how those statements and endeavours might be perceived and interpreted by an international

audience. As Sewell (1992) argues, global leadership in higher education requires models that are not only contextually grounded but also adaptable and compelling across diverse cultural and institutional environments.

To deepen the understanding of higher education reforms in China and beyond, future studies could (i) adopt comparative frameworks that compare China's higher education reforms with concurrent policy shifts in other nations (e.g., the U.S., Germany, and Australia) to identify global trends and localised responses. Such analysis could reveal how different systems address common challenges such as digital disruption or workforce readiness. Studies could also (ii) explore regional parallels, investigating higher education reforms in late-developing regions (e.g., Latin America, Africa), where nations similarly grapple with balancing local needs and global integration. Comparative insights could enrich debates on decolonising education and fostering South–South collaboration. Finally, future studies could (iii) track implementation outcomes by adopting longitudinal designs to assess the execution and impact of China's 2024 policies. Examining challenges (e.g., bureaucratic inertia, resource allocation) and adaptive strategies would provide a nuanced evaluation of their efficacy.

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Notes

1. “教育部部署进一步做好普通高等学校本科专业设置工作”(Jiaoyubu bushu jinyibu zuohao putong gaodeng xuexiao benke zhuanYe shezhi gongzuo, Notice on Further Improving Undergraduate Programme Management in General Higher Education Institutions), Ministry of Education, 02 April 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/moe_1034/s4930/202404/t20240418_1126253.html (accessed on 15 December 2024)
2. “教育部高等教育司关于开展2024年度普通高等学校本科专业设置工作的通知”(Jiaoyubu Gaodeng Jiaoyu Si guanyu kaizhan 2024 niandu putong gaodeng xuexiao benke zhuanYe shezhi gongzuo de tongzhi, Notice from the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation of Undergraduate Programme Setup for General Higher Education Institutions in 2024), Ministry of Education, 12 July 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A08/tongzhi/202407/t20240723_1142423.html (accessed on 05 December 2024)
3. 关于加快推动博士研究生教育高质量发展的意见”(Guanyu jiakuai tuidong boshi yanjiusheng jiaoyu gao zhiliang fazhan de yijian, Central Opinion on Accelerating the High-Quality Development of Doctoral Education), Ministry of Education, 20 October 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/202410/t20241020_1158425.html (accessed on 08 December 2024)

4. “研究生教育学科专业目录管理办法” (Yanjiusheng jiaoyuxue ke zhuan ye mulu guan li ban fa, Measures for the Administration of the Catalog of Disciplines and Majors of Graduate Education), Ministry of Education, 14 September 2022, http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A22/moe_833/202209/t20220914_660828.html (accessed on 08 December 2024)
5. “中共中央 国务院关于弘扬教育家精神加强新时代高素质专业化教师队伍建设的意见” (Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan guanyu hongyang jiaoyujia jingshen jiaqiang xin shidai gao suzhi zhuan yehua jiaoshi duiwu jianshe de yijian, Central Opinion on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teacher Development in the New Era), Ministry of Education, 06 August 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/202408/t20240826_1147269.html (accessed on 15 February 2025)
6. “深化新时代教育评价改革总体方案” (Shenhua xin shidai jiaoyu pingjia gaige zongti fangan, Overall Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era), Government of China, 13 October 2024, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-10/13/content_5551032.htm (accessed on 16 February 2025)
7. “教师数字素养” (Jiaoshi shuzi suyang, Standards for Teachers’ Digital Literacy), Ministry of Education, 30 November 2024, <http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A16/s3342/202302/W020230214594527529113.pdf> (accessed on 16 February 2025)

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