



# Achieving Universal Higher Education in China: Characteristics, Challenges, and Future Directions

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**Abstract:** The universalization of higher education in China has undergone a remarkable transformation driven by government policies and rapid economic growth. This study explores the characteristics and future development of this educational evolution. China's journey towards universalization began with ambitious policy initiatives in 1998, aiming to expand access to higher education. Within a mere 17 years, the gross enrollment rate in higher education surged from 9.8% to an impressive 50%, surpassing the United States' 30-year path to universality. This rapid expansion, fueled by a burgeoning economy, has raised questions about educational quality and employability. New universities have played a crucial role, expanding access and optimizing the higher education structure. However, they face challenges due to their short history and limited resources. The study also emphasizes the need for a balanced regional framework and an education model aligning with sustainable development goals. China's experience in universalizing higher education provides valuable insights for global educational development. This transformation serves as a noteworthy case study, highlighting the importance of balancing quantity and quality in higher education expansion and providing lessons for educational development worldwide.

**Keywords:** universalization, higher education, universities, China, government

## I. Introduction

The universalization of higher education in China represents a significant and well-planned educational transformation guided by government policies. This journey began with key policy initiatives in 1998, aiming to expand access to higher education. The subsequent rapid development of Chinese higher education has made it a noteworthy global phenomenon. This transformation is characterized by the state's formulation of quantitative targets to increase the scale of higher education, ultimately leading to a gross enrollment rate in higher education that exceeded 50% in 2019.

China's path to universalization in higher education has been remarkably swift, with the gross enrollment rate jumping from 9.8% in 1998 to 50% in 2019[1]. This progress, achieved in just 17 years, contrasts sharply with the 30-year journey to universalize higher education in the United States. This rapid expansion has outpaced the growth of middle-income countries globally, raising concerns about educational quality and employment prospects. China's rapid economic growth has been a crucial driver of higher education expansion, with universities expected to provide talent and intellectual support for economic and social development. Government investments in education, including the "Double First-Class" initiative, have played a pivotal role in supporting this growth. Additionally, the emergence of private higher education institutions has further enriched the higher education landscape.

New universities have also played a pivotal role in the universalization process. These institutions have expanded access to higher education, optimized its structure, and introduced innovative educational models. However, they face challenges due to their relatively short history and limited resources, emphasizing the need to balance expansion with quality improvement.

## II. Characteristics of the Universalization of Chinese Higher Education

### 2.1 Historical Milestones in Universalization

The universalization of higher education in China is a well-planned and government-guided process that represents a significant educational transformation. This transformation is driven by the state's formulation of quantitative targets to expand the scale of higher education.

The journey towards universalization began with key policy initiatives. In 1998, the Ministry of Education introduced the "Education Revitalization Plan for the 21st Century," which set an ambitious goal for China's gross enrollment rate in higher education to approach 15% by 2010<sup>[2]</sup>. This marked the initial push towards expanding access to higher education. Subsequently, in 1999, the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively



Promoting Quality Education" laid down crucial arrangements for increasing university enrollments. This decision ushered in a rapid development phase for Chinese higher education<sup>[2]</sup>. The year 2002 witnessed a significant milestone when the gross enrollment rate in higher education reached 15%, officially signaling the entry into the universalization stage. Building on these achievements, the "National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)" set forth the goal of achieving a higher level of universal education by 2020. This plan aimed to further elevate the level of universalization in higher education, with a target gross enrollment rate of 40%.

## 2.2 Rapid Expansion of Higher Education

The process of universalizing higher education in China has been a relatively short yet remarkable journey. In 1998, China set its sights on making higher education accessible to a broader population, and by 2002, the gross enrollment rate in higher education had surged from 9.8% to 15%. This marked the swift entry into the universalization stage, an achievement realized in just four years. What followed was equally impressive. From 2002, with a gross enrollment rate of 15%, to 2019, when it reached an impressive 50%, a mere 17 years had passed. To put this into perspective, the development of higher education from accessibility to universality in the United States took a considerably longer 30 years.

Data from the World Bank reveals a striking trend. While the expansion of higher education in high-income and middle-income countries has shown relatively stable growth, China's higher education system has experienced rapid and sustained expansion over the past two decades. This expansion has far outpaced the average growth rate of middle-income countries and has even surpassed the global average. While this rapid expansion has undeniably achieved remarkable milestones and gained international recognition, it has also brought forth valid concerns regarding educational quality and employment opportunities.

## 2.3 Economic Growth and Educational Demands

The acceleration of universalization in Chinese higher education has occurred in tandem with the rapid development of the national economy. Over the same two-decade period of rapid higher education expansion, China's per capita GDP witnessed a remarkable increase from 6,860 in 1998 to an impressive 64,644 in 2018, boasting an annual growth rate exceeding 6%. This high-speed economic growth has placed newfound and heightened demands on higher education institutions<sup>[4]</sup>.

Universities are now expected to provide talent and intellectual support that aligns with the needs of economic and social development. High-level universities are tasked with offering intellectual support for fostering innovative talent and conducting cutting-edge research. Meanwhile, regional undergraduate institutions are undergoing transitions to better serve local economic and social development, and vocational colleges have taken on the crucial role of nurturing highly skilled technical talent. Crucially, China's rapid economic growth has provided the financial backing needed to facilitate the universalization of higher education. Despite global financial crises and recent domestic economic slowdowns, investment in higher education has remained steady. Since 2012, government expenditure on education as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has consistently exceeded 4%. In 2018, higher education funding accounted for an impressive 26.04% of the total national education budget. This commitment has led to the emergence of initiatives like the "Double First-Class" construction and various specialized higher education plans. Additionally, private higher education has flourished, attracting social capital into the higher education sector.

## 2.4 The Role of New Universities

The universalization process of higher education in China has been greatly influenced by the emergence of new universities, marking a significant development in the 21st century. These institutions have played a crucial role in expanding access to higher education, optimizing its structure and distribution, and introducing innovative educational models<sup>[5]</sup>. This section delves into their contributions and the challenges they face.

The rapid growth of China's economy and the simultaneous progress of higher education universalization have led to the establishment of numerous new undergraduate institutions and vocational colleges. These institutions have made substantial contributions to the overall goal of making higher education accessible to a wider population<sup>[5]</sup>.

Consider the example of undergraduate education: as of 2015, out of the 1,219 regular undergraduate institutions nationwide, a remarkable 678 were newly established. This accounts for a substantial 55.6% of the total number of undergraduate institutions, highlighting the significant presence of these new universities<sup>[6]</sup>.

Private universities have been instrumental in the universalization process. They have not only added to the numbers but have also significantly increased enrollment, the student population, and the number of graduates. Private institutions contribute to about 22% to 25% of the corresponding national figures, making them an indispensable component of Chinese higher education. New universities in China have played a multifaceted role in the advancement of universal higher education. They have expanded access, improved the overall structure and distribution of higher education, attracted social capital to the sector, and explored innovative educational systems and development models<sup>[7]</sup>.

However, it's important to acknowledge that these new universities face their own set of challenges. Their relatively short history and limited resources pose significant obstacles. Addressing issues such as developing

innovative talent cultivation models and enhancing the quality of teaching staff has become a focal point as China enters the stage of universalization in higher education. Balancing rapid expansion with quality improvement remains a critical task for these institutions.

### **III. The Future Development of Universalization in Chinese Higher Education**

#### **3.1 Inclusivity in Higher Education**

One dimension of achieving universalization in Chinese higher education involves establishing an inclusive higher education system. This inclusivity should progressively become more open and extend to all individuals eligible for higher education, ensuring that the diverse educational needs of the population are met. Inclusivity in higher education goes beyond primary education; it encompasses higher education as well. The vision of "Education for All," introduced by UNESCO in 1990 through the "World Declaration on Education for All," emphasizes that education is an inherent human right. Universal education aims to fulfill the fundamental learning needs of all individuals[4]. UNESCO reiterated its commitment to inclusivity in education during the 48th International Conference on Education in 2008, held in Geneva, Switzerland, under the theme "Inclusive Education: the Way of the Future." UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay stated that quality education should be characterized by inclusiveness and a commitment to enabling all learners, regardless of various factors, to participate fully[9].

#### **3.2 Diversified Higher Education Structure**

Constructing an inclusive higher education system necessitates the establishment of a diversified higher education structure and mechanism. This system should provide pathways for individuals with the right to access higher education, ensuring that they possess the necessary knowledge and aptitude. It should enable them to smoothly enter higher education institutions, thereby realizing their aspirations. Importantly, this system should be non-discriminatory and open to all individuals desiring higher education. This approach differs significantly from previous higher education models, as its primary goal is to achieve universal education at the higher education level.

#### **3.3 Coherent and Harmonized Higher Education Framework**

Universalizing higher education is a complex endeavor influenced by factors such as population size, economic, and social development stages rather than being solely determined by higher education itself. Regardless of the scale, universalized higher education structures are intricate, representing a synthesis of quantity and quality within the higher education sector. This intricacy is closely tied to the balance between quantity and quality. Generally, larger-scale systems exhibit a wider spectrum of quality disparities, resulting in more intricate structures. Conversely, smaller-scale systems tend to have greater homogeneity in quality and fewer disparities. On a global scale, both China and the United States have expansive higher education systems as they pursue universalization. In sheer scale, China surpasses the United States significantly. Consequently, the quality disparities between higher education institutions in China and the United States are more pronounced compared to other nations[8]. Achieving universalized higher education requires embracing differentiated development, with the expansion of differentiation as a powerful strategy to enhance higher education's adaptability.

However, the path to universalized education goes beyond differentiation; it emphasizes the importance of coordinating and integrating these differences. Effective coordination and integration are essential for universalized higher education to effectively respond to the demands of economic and social development, cater to diverse groups' educational needs, maintain the developmental order of higher education, and establish a mutually beneficial synergy between higher education and economic and social progress.

Coordinated and integrated development relies on the establishment of effective interlocking mechanisms connecting different levels, types, and forms of higher education. This enables seamless interconnectivity, organic amalgamation, and coordinated progress among various segments of higher education. This includes undergraduate and graduate education, vocational education, general higher education, full-time and part-time education, offline and online education, and other levels, types, and forms of higher education working collaboratively to advance, communicate, and evolve together in concert.

#### **3.3 Equitable Regional Higher Education Framework**

When assessing the universalization of higher education, the focus often extends beyond national borders to encompass regional (economic) considerations, with the nation taking precedence. Regardless of a country's size in terms of landmass or population, regional higher education planning presents an enduring challenge[10]. In exceptionally small nations characterized by limited land area and population, the issue of regional higher education planning may not be prominent and may not receive significant attention. However, in the majority of countries worldwide, regional planning remains a critical concern in the realm of higher education development.

Throughout phases of elitism and universalization, higher education tends to experience preferential growth in culturally and economically advanced regions. High-quality higher education resources, particularly in historically and culturally distinguished cities and economically prosperous urban centers, tend to expand

rapidly. Even in cases where the capital city may not host highly developed higher education, its historical and cultural significance, along with economic progress, often positions it as a leader in terms of higher education advancement. As a nation enters the universalization phase, higher education continues to expand in the capital city, major urban areas, and economically developed regions[11].

As universalization progresses to its later stages, higher education development approaches saturation, and incremental growth reaches or nears its peak. Consequently, achieving regional equilibrium in development becomes a tangible goal. Regional balance becomes a hallmark of universalized higher education, and achieving regional equilibrium in development is a critical criterion for advanced universalization in higher education. Underdeveloped regions cannot solely rely on higher education development in affluent regions and major cities to meet their economic and social development needs; they must also depend on localized higher education development. Hence, the universalization of higher education strives to establish a balanced regional framework. A balanced layout does not entail absolute uniformity, nor does it imply complete parity. Instead, it involves maintaining measured differentiation in quantity and structure across various regions while emphasizing regional distinctiveness and addressing disparities.

### 3.4 Education Model for Sustainable Development of Individuals and Society

Higher education plays a dual role, serving both individual development and societal progress. These two objectives are intricately linked, with societal advancement springing from the promotion of individual growth. Without fostering individual development, the pursuit of societal progress remains unattainable. Therefore, questions surrounding the type of individuals to be nurtured, the intended beneficiaries of this nurturing, and the methods of achieving it are of paramount importance in the realm of education. Failure to effectively address these questions hinders the functionality of higher education and undermines its role.

During the phases of elitism and universalization, due to incomplete educational development, there was often a lack of emphasis on individuals themselves and the cultivation of holistic personal development. As the transition to the universalization stage unfolds, despite variations in the quality of educational institutions and the aptitudes of students, higher education's mission is to ensure that all students experience harmonious development. This involves integrating the needs of societal production, professional skill requirements, and career development aspirations into the comprehensive development of individuals. This overarching objective guides the construction of talent development models across all levels and types of higher education institutions during the universalization stage. It represents the foundational imperative of higher education development. Only through this approach can higher education achieve its goal of promoting the harmonious development of individuals, and only in this way can it catalyze sustainable societal advancement.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, China's journey towards universalizing higher education, marked by rapid expansion and government-driven policies, serves as a significant case study with global implications. The rapid growth from 9.8% to 50% in the gross enrollment rate within just 17 years, surpassing the United States' 30-year trajectory, underscores the transformative power of strategic planning and economic development in higher education. New universities have played a pivotal role in expanding access, although they grapple with challenges tied to their relatively short history and resource limitations. The emphasis on balanced regional development and an education model aligned with sustainable individual and societal progress reflects China's forward-looking approach. This experience offers valuable insights into achieving the delicate balance between quantity and quality in higher education expansion, serving as a beacon for educational development worldwide.

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