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## Strategies and challenges in promoting lifelong learning in higher education – the case of China

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### Abstract

Current pedagogy is ill-suited to a learning society with rapid information technology development; promoting lifelong learning is therefore a compelling obligation of higher education. Taking China as an example, we call on higher education institutions (HEIs) to employ five distinct strategies to rejuvenate teaching. First, to revisit what education is for and to articulate in mission statements the fostering of students' desire for and ability to access lifelong learning. Second, to shift pedagogical emphasis to 'why to learn' and 'how to learn', taking advantage of direct personal interactions in a learning community to help individuals personalize their 'what to learn'. Third, to encourage faculty members themselves to be lifelong learners, shifting their role from authorities of knowledge and information to experienced learners guiding students in their individual search for meaning and learning process. Fourth, to evaluate learning outcomes based on individual and personal contexts during the HEI selection process, consequently guiding the teaching and learning practices in secondary and primary education. Fifth, to cooperate with employers in formulating and updating learning goals and curriculum design, using practical cases and problem-solving as teaching materials not only to provide opportunities for students to clarify 'why to learn' and practise 'how to learn', but also to personalize 'what to learn'. However, in implementing these strategies, Chinese HEIs face two culture challenges, concerning faculty members and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, that they need to overcome.

# Strategies and challenges in promoting lifelong learning in higher education – the case of China

*Sunny Xinchun Niu and Heqing Liu*

## Introduction

In a learning society with evolving technology development enabling information to become ever more accessible, promoting lifelong learning is not only a compelling obligation of higher education but also its *raison d'être*. That is, higher education should foster, with fresh motivations and approaches, students' capacity to continue learning throughout life, enabling them to better deal with changes both as an individual and a citizen of a learning society. Higher education has expanded worldwide in the past decades: the gross higher education enrolment rate has already crossed the threshold of 50% in about 100 developed and developing countries (UIS, 2011; OECD, 2018; NCES, 2019). According to Martin Trow's (1999) three-stage theory of higher education popularization (elite–mass–universal), when one in two youths between the age of 18 and 22 can receive post-secondary education, we have achieved the age of universal access to higher education and reached the dawn of a learning society.

Meanwhile, the rapid development of information technology (IT) has greatly facilitated broader access to higher education and training through computers and the internet. For example, there were about 26,000 MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), including both informal and formal education, serving over 310 million people worldwide in 2019 (Shah, 2019; CNNIC, 2020). But MOOCs represent only one aspect of IT applications in the field of higher education. The suddenness of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created the largest disruption of formal education systems in history; closures of schools and other learning spaces impacted almost all student populations worldwide. Educational institutions, including colleges and universities, were rushed into online teaching. Such an event is a wake-up call for HEIs, to confront the reality that current pedagogy, challenged as it is by online resources made available by IT, is ill-suited to the learning society.

One of the most influential events in higher education development in the twenty-first century is the dramatic expansion of Chinese higher education since 1998. China has completed the transition from elite higher education to mass higher education and universal higher education in just 20 years. The gross higher education enrolment rate crossed the threshold of 50% in 2019 (MoE, 2020); China has since entered the stage of universal access. As the world's largest higher education system and a latecomer, China serves as an important example in the promotion of lifelong learning. In this article, by addressing the case of China, we seek to inspire HEIs to employ multiple strategies to rejuvenate teaching and, in doing so, meet their obligation to promote lifelong learning.

## Strategies to promote lifelong learning in Chinese higher education

First and foremost, Chinese HEIs need to articulate lifelong learning in their mission statements. Scholars have long considered education as having both social and individual functions. Education trains students to better serve society and humanity and develop into well-rounded individuals, with moral development as its culmination. However, instrumentalism has been the prevailing attitude towards higher education ever since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The purposes of higher education have been dominated by its social function, and economic returns have been heavily emphasized to motivate individual students to receive a college education. Higher education manufactures replaceable cogs for society at large and mainly serves as a means for individuals to make a living. In recent years, the overwhelming emphasis on society-oriented educational purposes has relented, and individual-oriented education purposes have entered the

public discourse (State Council of China, 1994).

The *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*, a critically important government document published in 2000, states that higher education ‘performs the important task of cultivating high-calibre professionals, developing science, technology and culture, and driving socialist modernization’, and aims to produce ‘high-calibre professionals and top-notch innovators with steadfast faith, moral integrity, rich knowledge and superb abilities’ (Government of China, 2010, p. 19). Note that it conveys a clear message that individual development is a priority, yet individually oriented education purposes are vaguely defined, and any clarification is closely connected to the pressing national needs for innovation and scientific advance.

Such vagueness and emphasis have an important bearing on Chinese HEIs: lifelong learning capacity development is missing in their mission statements. Among 42 ‘double first-class’ universities,<sup>1</sup> including the renowned Tsinghua University and Beijing University, socially oriented education dominates their mission statements (Wang and Tian, 2020). Students are trained to be socially responsible, with innovative ability, international perspective and scientific capacity, resulting in well-rounded individuals with humanistic values. These skills are closely connected to the social and economic development of contemporary China with its urgent need to compete internationally.

In contrast, it is not clear what qualities ‘well-rounded individuals’ would demonstrate in a learning society. Perhaps mission statements of several of the world’s leading HEIs can provide some clues. MIT emphasizes ‘passion to work’, Stanford University seeks ‘to prepare students to think broadly, deeply and critically, and to contribute to the world’, Harvard University highlights ‘a journey of intellectual transformation’, the University of Cambridge stresses ‘a questioning spirit [...] and the ability to learn throughout life’. As such, the desire for lifelong learning ought to be articulated in the mission statements of Chinese HEIs – at least the leading universities – as well.

The second strategy Chinese HEIs need to adopt in order to promote lifelong learning in the country is one that shifts the pedagogical emphasis to ‘why learn’ and ‘how to learn’. The instrumentalist attitude towards education has led to an overwhelming emphasis on scientism and an underappreciation of humanism in curricula.

This instrumentalist attitude also dictates that ‘what to learn’ is stressed over ‘why learn’, and efficient knowledge transfer, such as lectures and rote learning, dominates ‘how to learn’. Chinese HEIs need to shift pedagogical emphasis to ‘why learn’ and ‘how to learn.’ The former constitutes curiosity and desire to know, moral development and concerns for social welfare, whereas the latter stresses students’ active participation and experience in the learning process. It is critically important that ‘why learn’ and ‘how to learn’ allow searching for personalized meaning and learning paths, aiming at character development and capacity growth for each student, and facilitating his/her own ‘what to learn’. That is, character building and personal growth concur with cognitive growth; students’ learning is to develop them as unique individuals within larger society.

This pedagogical shift not only promotes students’ inclination towards lifelong learning but also legitimizes the very existence of educational institutions in the IT age. As knowledge and information become more and more openly and easily available to the public, HEIs, both in and outside China, have to ask the hard question, ‘What are we here for in educating students?’ (see Trow, 1999). It is envisioned that HEIs, utilizing broader access to knowledge and information enabled by IT but taking advantage of direct personal interactions in a learning community of students and faculty members,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Double first-class’ refers to the world’s first-class universities and first-class disciplines. Building first-class universities and first-class disciplines is a major strategic decision of Chinese central government, aiming to improve its educational development, enhance its core competitiveness, and to lay the foundation for long-term development (State Council of China, 2015).

will emphasize ‘why learn’ and ‘how to learn’ so as to help individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds and various walks of life to personalize their ‘what to learn’.

The third pedagogical shift requires that HEIs’ faculty members themselves be lifelong learners. In shifting to an emphasis on ‘why learn’ and ‘how to learn’, faculty members are shifting their role from authorities of knowledge and information to that of experienced learners. Their main task is no longer to transfer knowledge and information but to guide students in their personalized search for meaning and learning process. When individual students encounter difficult decisions and face confusing information, faculty members serve as counsellors and consultants. Their task is to encourage students to examine different alternatives and to find contradictions, to provide advice but let students learn to make their own decisions so as to accomplish their knowledge construction, capacity growth and moral development.

To fulfil such a guidance role, faculty members themselves need to be lifelong learners. Faculty members need to be aware that they are still in the process of capacity growth and character development. They continue conducting research and improving teaching practice because of their own curiosity and their concerns for social welfare, they continue self-reflection in the search for meaning because of their own pursuit of moral development. In this lifelong learning process, faculty members continue their personal growth and knowledge construction throughout their professional careers and lives. Therefore, faculty members are able to counsel and guide students not because they have all the right answers, but because they are role models as experienced learners. In fact, professional standards for teachers in the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and other countries and areas already include elements of lifelong learning and continued personal growth (INTASC, 2011; TDA, 2011).

Fourth, higher education admission selection in China needs to reflect a lifelong learning culture. Originally designed to equalize opportunity for all, the college entrance exam has become the single most important, if not the sole, criterion for higher education admission in China. This instrumentalist attitude towards education has led to an extreme case of ‘teaching to the test’ to prepare students for college admission. This practice has resulted in ‘high scores and low skills’ – worse yet, it has stifled curiosity and the desire to know and conveyed a utilitarian view of education to youths; students enter higher education with incomplete and distorted attitudes to ‘why learn’ and ‘how to learn’.

China has made commendable efforts to reform higher education admission in recent years, yet still with a pervasive instrumentalist attitude. Evaluation criteria have transitioned from a heavy emphasis on knowledge acquisition to whole-person evaluation, which consists of four elements – values, qualities, abilities and knowledge. Evaluation measures have expanded to include an in-person interview and high school records (Examination Centre of the MoE, 2019); however, this whole-person evaluation design is still solely guided by socially oriented education purposes and an efficiency principle. The evaluation does include the elements of value and quality, yet concern for personal development as a well-rounded and unique individual is still seriously out of balance with the concern for service to society. Meanwhile, in the name of fair competition, selection relies heavily on assessment outcomes without much regard for individual students’ personal contexts. Future reforms to higher education admission therefore need to include elements of individuality and to evaluate learning outcomes with consideration of the personal context. Only when higher education admission selection reflects elements of lifelong learning, such as motivation to learn and approach to learning, can a lifelong learning culture cascade down through college admission criteria to guide teaching and learning practices in secondary and primary education.

Finally, Chinese HEIs need to cooperate with employers in promoting a lifelong learning culture. The high unemployment rate among college graduates coexists with vacant positions in China, and employers are most unsatisfied with college graduates’ lack of career orientation (Sun, 2013). Partly this is a result of the instrumentalist attitude to education in China, which has led to undue attention

to the credential itself. Students enter higher education with an incomplete and distorted ‘why learn’ attitude and leave lacking a personalized search for meaning and learning process. They resort to economic return as the primary guiding principle in employment choice.

Chinese higher education institutions need to cooperate with employers in implementing the pedagogical shift to ‘why learn’ and ‘how to learn’. Employers know the talent they need and the deficiencies in the knowledge, abilities and qualities of college graduates. They should be included in formulating and updating learning goals to ensure the inclusion of the capacities needed to better serve today’s society and humanity. Meanwhile, employers deal with ever-evolving problems and cases; creatively utilizing IT, they can provide real-life scenarios and settings for students to understand social needs and practical applications of theoretical understanding. These practical cases and problem-solving can be included as teaching materials to motivate and facilitate student learning. In other words, HEIs should continue consulting employers over curriculum design to ensure relevance and connection to practice.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that although cooperation with employers connects students with society at large, the purpose of establishing this connection is not simply to guarantee employment. The real purpose is to not merely to provide opportunities for students to clarify ‘why learn’ and practise ‘how to learn’, but also to personalize ‘what to learn’ with guidance from faculty members as counsellors and consultants. This individualized process makes students’ career choices part of their character development and capacity growth. That is, in a learning society, individually oriented education purposes need to go ahead of society-oriented education purposes. Unique individuals with a willingness and capacity to take on lifelong learning not only attain balanced character development and cognitive growth but also can better serve society and humanity.

### Challenges of promoting lifelong learning in Chinese higher education

In implementing the above-mentioned strategies, Chinese HEIs face two culture challenges. The first concerns faculty members: traditional Chinese culture considers teachers as authority figures, at the top of a highly hierarchical student–teacher relationship. It is culturally forbidden for faculty members to acknowledge to their students that they may not have all the right answers. In parallel, students expect to receive final answers from teachers and to follow their instructions. With such a cultural tradition, the critical step in promoting a lifelong learning culture is the responsibility of faculty members. If Chinese faculty members can learn to view themselves as fellow learners with their students, though with more experience, they will be able to serve as role models to promote lifelong learning. They will also be able to respect and better understand their students and therefore best accomplish the counsellor and consultant task.

Faculty development programmes can be a means of helping to break the cultural tradition and to promote lifelong learning among faculty members in Chinese HEIs. In the process of articulating lifelong learning in their mission statement, Chinese HEIs need to bring their faculty onto the same page. Faculty development programmes can raise awareness of lifelong learning by encouraging research and sharing the findings on the benefits of this new learning role. In addition, faculty development programmes can focus on a critical element of pedagogy: the syllabus. In guiding faculty to specify clear course-level goals that reflect current education goals, including lifelong learning and update teaching materials that are more relevant and connected to the needs of society, the programmes ensure that the members of faculty themselves are confronted with a reality of lifelong learning.

The second cultural challenge concerns socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. These groups benefit from the mass and universal access to higher education. In China, females overtook males in total enrolment in 2009 and have become the majority since then (MoE, 2019). In recent years, over 70% of higher education enrollees have been first-generation students, the majority of them from rural areas (Zhang, Zhao and Guo, 2016). However, these disadvantaged groups are concentrated in lower-tier HEIs and in more technical and vocational fields where the instrumentalist attitude towards



education still prevails. Furthermore, these students are disadvantaged in active learning that requires self-reflection, a spirit of inquiry, and cooperation with peers; they are also less active in student–teacher interactions. They tend to equate learning with formal schooling (e.g. Zhang, 2016); therefore, these students will tend to severely lag behind in embracing a culture of lifelong learning. In shifting the pedagogy, HEIs and faculty members need to creatively utilize IT and peer learning to address group differences so that inequality is mitigated rather than exacerbated in the effort to promote lifelong learning.

## Final remarks

As a final note, we restate that China is not an exception but an example that should be promoted as an exemplar of a way to move forward on lifelong learning. It is common for modern societies to hold an instrumentalist attitude towards higher education (Hersh, Miller and Fielding, 1998), and countries such as the United States are shifting emphasis towards society-oriented educational purpose in the context of increasing international competition. Meanwhile, employers in many countries have high regard for the capacity to continue learning, and first-generation students and under-represented minority students in the West tend to believe learning comes to a halt after leaving school (e.g. Bergerson, 2007). The strategies and challenges discussed above are therefore applicable to a certain extent to countries already in the stage or well on the way to universal access. Notably, although China has completed the transition to universal higher education in only one-third of the time of other countries, the instrumentalist attitude towards education is far more prevailing than elsewhere; the need to change pedagogic practice to promote lifelong learning is therefore far more pressing in China.

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## Embracing a culture of lifelong learning

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To further explore the potential of lifelong learning for achieving a more equal, prosperous, healthy and peaceful future, the experts were invited to contribute a paper reflecting different disciplinary perspectives on lifelong learning. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to UIL.

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