



COMMENT
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PROGRAMMED TO FULFILL GLOBAL AMBITIONS

Casting a wider net for excellence in China's higher education system.

To further enhance the capacity, status and global competitiveness of China's higher education system, in 2015 the government announced the Developing World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines project, known as World Class 2.0. Early in 2017, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission released a blueprint for the project.

World Class 2.0 replaces two previous projects, 211 and 985, launched in 1993 and 1998, which sought to develop China's academic and research excellence. These projects have provided substantial financial support for a small number of universities, and have significantly enhanced selected institutions' capacity for research and innovation. These, particularly nine elite universities known as the C9 group, lead the country in teaching, research and contributions to socio-economic development in Chinese society. They have also improved their positions in global rankings.

However, these previous initiatives, which focused on outcomes such as rankings, have been criticized for lacking transparency and competition. For instance, the government cherry-picked individual universities for inclusion in these projects with little transparent criteria. A direct impact of this was to starve the bottom universities by feeding the top, increasing inequality and widening disparity in the higher education system. Commentators on the national higher education strategy argue that financial investment alone cannot propel China's universities to world-class level. They say a sustainable academic culture is sorely needed. The World Class 2.0 project is intended to address some of these concerns.

The project has three main goals: to develop a number of world-class universities and first-class academic disciplines by 2020; to have more universities and disciplines among the best in the world and to enhance the country's overall higher education capacity by 2030.

It also aims to lead the number, quality and capacity of world-class universities and disciplines among the world's best, becoming a

higher education powerhouse by 2050.

The new project will be different from past programmes in several significant ways. Compared to the 985's three-year cycle, World Class 2.0 will have a five-year cycle. As well as supporting elite universities, World Class 2.0 will also support about 100 elite disciplines. In this regard, the project recognizes that China needs a differentiated higher education system, and encourages universities to exploit their advantages. Funding will be concentrated among those departments and schools close to becoming world-class, those seeking to address socio-economic needs, and those focused on emerging and interdisciplinary subjects.

"THE WCU2.0 PROJECT IS LIKELY TO FURTHER ADVANCE CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AND REFORM SOME ASPECTS OF ACADEMIC CULTURE."

A committee of experts is being set up to review and provide advice on university and discipline selection. All Chinese universities are eligible, and selection will be based on relevant international evaluation criteria, institutional facilities and infrastructure, teaching and research performance, and international competitiveness. With the committee's advice, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission will make a final decision. The first group of universities and disciplines will be announced later this year.

World Class 2.0 will also diversify funding

sources to support selected universities. Central universities will be supported by the national government, while local universities will be funded by provincial governments. Provincial governments are also being encouraged to seek funding from local communities and industries, to create a sustainable and long-term revenue stream.

Funding will also be directly linked to institutional performance, based on mid-cycle and final evaluations. Institutions that fail will have their funding cut, and may even be removed from the project.

World Class 2.0 is being promoted as an open competition among all qualified institutions, but there is a risk it may widen the gap between top universities and the rest. For instance, universities included in previous excellence programmes are more likely to have higher quality disciplines and programmes than those institutions excluded in the past. As a result, universities in the middle or bottom may remain marginalized, and disparities in teaching and research quality are likely to be exacerbated.

While previous projects sought to improve China's higher education system based on western criteria and indicators, policy documents emphasize that World Class 2.0 will better serve the demands of China's socio-economic reform, and develop paths to excellence with 'Chinese features'. These features, however, have yet to be defined.

The World Class 2.0 project is likely to further advance China's higher education system and reform some aspects of academic culture. But, it remains to be seen whether the project can address systemic challenges in higher education, such as mediocre teaching and research quality in some institutions, a lack of innovation capacity, and an over-reliance on rankings and publishing papers in high-impact journals. ■

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