

How China's Elite Universities Will Have to Change

CHINESE UNIVERSITIES are undergoing rapid transformation as they strive to conform to international norms in response to a government campaign to develop world-class educational institutions. By some measures, the effort seems to be working: On the recently released Global Employability Survey, a list of universities that employers said produced the best graduates, Peking University went from ranking 129th in 2011 to 11th this year—not far behind Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, among other elite institutions. Four universities in mainland China made the top 100 for the first time.

Those are impressive gains, but if China's universities are to fully join the ranks of world-class institutions, they must embrace a culture of academic peer review that is only beginning to develop there.

It is an important issue because China's higher-education reforms will affect not only China's future but also the future of the rest of the world, as China's economic and cultural influences continue to expand globally.

Today in China, academic committees are in charge of most forms of evaluations, from tenure to grants and fellowships. These committees typically include the president of the university (appointed by the government) and department chairs, as well as full professors and one or more of the department's Communist Party representatives. Increasingly, these are regular faculty

members with additional political appointments within the party, rather than full-time party administrators who are not scholars.

But authority is gradually shifting from administrators and politicians to scholars. Last year, Xu Xianming, president of Shandong University, one of China's largest elite universities, took himself off an evaluation committee to avoid interfering with "academic authority." He was hailed by many people as an exemplary representative of a new generation of Chinese academic leaders, and published reports indicated that the government accepted and promoted his decision.

Before the reform efforts, politics—both party-based and personal—were often the determining factor in faculty-performance reviews. Now there is a turn toward measuring productivity quantitatively, to deflect politics and biases. But that is not without problems, because an increased publication output is not necessarily indicative of scholarly excellence. And tenure reviews still often do not require external letters but are based on the input of the local department and university. That encourages scholars to focus on their relationships with immediate colleagues instead of engaging nationally or internationally with peers.

The same localism permeates the training of graduate students, who typically apply to study with a specific mentor who holds the title of supervisor of doctoral students. That system encourages students to be good apprentices rather than to ready themselves for

dialogues with other experts in their fields. Conforming to international norms would certainly require more-universal modes of evaluation.

The strengthening of peer review in China does not necessarily mean importing American peer-review practices, which are a distinctly American product that integrates research and higher education. But it is with the American system in mind that we should be asking a number of questions about the challenges of strengthening peer review in China:

1. Given the importance of local ties for attaining academic power and prestige, how can universities weaken those ties and

strengthen the use of more-universal criteria of evaluation?

2. Higher-education policies will be more effective if they explicitly avoid party politics. How can that be accomplished given party influence in Chinese education?

3. Numerous sources of financing for research in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors are crucial for academic excellence. How can these be made more available in China?

4. It will be important to make and enforce rules of ethics concerning self-promotion, conflict of interests, and abstention. How can those norms be established in

graduate programs and through professional associations? This is going to be particularly important in a system that traditionally values apprenticeship and intellectual genealogies.

5. The criteria of evaluation that matter most—originality and social and intellectual significance—may be defined differently at different institutions. How can the Chinese develop a consensus on those criteria?

6. In a rapidly growing higher-education system, with more than 2,300 universities, how can an effective, coordinated system of peer review take root?

The emergence of world-class universities creates the potential for China to become a vastly influential part of the higher-education landscape. We should all care whether the academic work being done there meets a standard that scholars in the United States—and around the world—can trust and build upon. ■

**By Michèle Lamont
and Anna Sun**

*Michèle Lamont is a professor of European studies and of sociology and African and African-American studies at Harvard University. The Chinese translation of her book *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Harvard University Press) was published this year. Anna Sun is assistant professor of sociology and Asian studies at Kenyon College. She is the author of *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities*, forthcoming from Princeton University Press.*