

Navigating Excellence And Innovation: A Comprehensive Study Of China's "Double First-Class" Initiative In Higher Education

Wanying Liang^{1*}

^{1*}University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Email: liangw@uwm.edu

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation and ramifications of China's "Double First-Class" initiative, a major educational policy launched in 2015 aimed at transforming selected universities and disciplines into world-class entities. Focusing on the period from 2015 to 2022, this research investigates how specific units within participating universities have responded to the initiative in terms of faculty recruitment, curriculum development, research focus, and international collaborations. Employing Institutional Theory, the analysis examines how universities adapt to, conform with, or resist these mandates, and assesses the extent to which the initiative fosters homogeneity or diversity within China's higher education system. The findings reveal varied adaptations across institutions, influenced by existing disparities and institutional capacities, highlighting a complex interplay between global competitive pressures and local educational values. This study contributes to the discourse on global higher education reforms by providing insights into the nuanced processes of policy implementation and the strategic positioning of Chinese higher education within the global knowledge economy.

Keywords: Double First-Class Initiative, Faculty recruitment, International Collaboration, Institutional Theory, Education Reform

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this study is to explore the implementation and implications of China's "Double First-Class" initiative, a pivotal policy aimed at propelling selected universities and disciplines into the global echelon of academic excellence. This exploration delves into several critical areas: faculty recruitment, development, curriculum development, and international collaboration. By examining these aspects, the research aims to illuminate the transformative ambitions and the intricate realities of enhancing China's higher education landscape in alignment with global ideas and domestic educational priorities [2]. The research question is: How have specific units within Chinese universities participating in the 'Double First-Class' initiative responded to the policy over time (2015-2022), and what observable changes have occurred in areas like faculty recruitment, curriculum development, research focus, and international collaborations?

The "Double First-Class" initiative, unveiled by the Chinese government in 2015, represents a significant policy move towards redefining the country's higher education system. It aims at developing first-class universities and disciplines to drive China to the forefront of global education and research. This policy is an evolution of China's commitment to academic excellence, building on previous endeavors like Project 211 and Project 985, yet with a broader and more ambitious scope [8]. The initiative is not just a continuation of efforts to enhance China's academic reputation; it is a strategic response to the global knowledge economy's demands, seeking to position Chinese higher education as a leader in innovation, scientific discovery, and scholarly excellence.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional Theory offers a profound framework for analyzing the adaptation of China's "Double First-Class" initiative on its higher education landscape, mainly focusing on how universities navigate external mandates toward achieving global excellence. Drawing from the foundational works of Scott [7] and Meyer and Rowan [5], this theory sheds light on organizational responses—whether universities adapt, conform, or resist—to

governmental directives to propel them to world-class status. It uniquely positions this study to explore how Chinese universities respond to the initiative, leveraging concepts such as institutional isomorphism [1] to investigate the extent of conformity or divergence from the initiative's standards. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of whether the initiative leads to homogenization across the sector or fosters a diversity of responses that enrich the higher education landscape in China.

By applying Institutional Theory to the "Double First-Class" initiative, the analysis extends to institutionalizing change within universities and the dynamics of legitimacy and conformity. It delves into how changes driven by the initiative become deeply embedded within university systems, transforming their operational and strategic frameworks over time. This theoretical lens highlights the complex interplay between external pressures, such as government policies and global competition, and internal dynamics, including leadership decisions and organizational culture, shaping universities' strategies for faculty development, research excellence, and international collaboration. Furthermore, the theory facilitates a critical examination of how universities strive for legitimacy and recognition by aligning with the initiative's goals, revealing the strategic choices institutions make in pursuing excellence under the pressure of governmental mandates.

Institutional Theory thus provides an understanding of the organizational dynamics underpinning the "Double First-Class" initiative, enabling a comprehensive exploration of how Chinese universities adapt to and navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by this significant educational reform. This analysis illuminates the paths taken by universities in response to the initiative. It contributes to the broader discourse on higher education reforms, offering insights into the intricate mechanisms of policy implementation and organizational change in the global context of higher education.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving landscape of higher education in China, mainly through the lens of the "Double First-Class" initiative, underscores China's endeavor to harmonize with global initiatives of academic excellence while fostering a distinctive approach to higher education reforms. As part of a broader spectrum of educational reforms, this initiative mirrors the strategic efforts observed globally to enhance the quality and adaptation of higher education institutions. This section delves into the nuances of faculty development, curriculum innovation, and international collaborations through a comparative analysis, drawing parallels and distinctions with global trends and practices.

Empirical studies, such as those by Marginson [4] Zaman and Mohsin [9] and Liu et al. [3] provide a foundational understanding of the criteria defining world-class universities and the strategic implications of such initiatives on a global scale. These works highlight the global pursuit of academic excellence, situating China's efforts in a comprehensive international context. Specifically, Marginson's [4] exploration of the global-local dichotomy in higher education offers critical insights into Chinese universities' challenges and opportunities in aligning with global trends while preserving unique cultural and educational identities.

Furthermore, Liu et al.'s [3] work on the essential elements of world-class universities, including strategic resource allocation and the promotion of academic collaboration, offers a comparative lens through which to evaluate Chinese universities' responses to the "Double First-Class" initiative. Their findings underscore the multifaceted nature of achieving excellence in education and research, providing a benchmark for assessing China's progress in elevating its higher education system [3]. The study provides insights into the operationalization of policy measures to elevate Chinese universities to world-class status. While it does not engage in a comparative analysis with other global initiatives, including a worldwide perspective enriches the understanding of China's position and strategy within the international quest for academic excellence. By delving into the practices and outcomes of the "Double First-Class" initiative, this research sheds light on how selected Chinese universities navigate the challenges and opportunities the policy presents. This analysis extends beyond general discussions on the initiative, offering detailed case studies that reveal how institutions are implementing strategies for faculty recruitment, curriculum development, and fostering international collaborations. In doing so, the study uncovers the multifaceted and dynamic nature of policy adaptation within the complex ecosystem of Chinese higher education [6].

The research further distinguishes itself by exploring the institutional responses to the initiative, highlighting the diversity of university strategies employed to align with national goals while pursuing global excellence. This approach provides an understanding of the initiative's role in shaping China's higher education landscape, contributing to the discourse on how countries can strategically enhance their academic systems in response to the demands of the global knowledge economy.

Moreover, the systematic search strategy, incorporating a global perspective on higher education excellence initiatives akin to China's "Double First-Class," facilitates a comprehensive comparison of international efforts to bolster university standards. Liu et al. [3] explore the landscape of world-class universities, identifying factors like innovative research output, strategic resource allocation, and an environment that fosters academic excellence as essential components. Their findings emphasize that world-class status is not merely a result of substantial funding but also of cultivating a culture of excellence and openness to global scientific communities. This holistic approach includes faculty development programs, cutting-edge curriculum design, and international collaborations, highlighting the importance of strategic planning and governance in achieving and maintaining world-class standards. Salmi [6] complements this view by elucidating the three core pillars

critical to the success of top-tier universities: a concentrated talent pool, abundant resources, and favorable governance. He notably points out that excellence initiatives worldwide have increasingly focused on internationalization as a key strategy for elevating their global standing. Salmi's work examines how these factors synergize to propel institutions to the forefront of global education and research, underscoring universities' need to adapt to the rapid changes in global higher education dynamics through innovative strategies in faculty development, curriculum reform, and international partnerships.

IV. Methodology

The research plan for examining the "Double First-Class" initiative in Chinese higher education adopts a qualitative methodology, emphasizing a multiple case study design to explore the intricate dynamics of policy implementation and its adaptation on faculty development, curriculum innovation, and international collaborations. I choose this approach for its strength in capturing the nuanced, context-specific phenomena central to understanding this policy's complex interactions and outcomes within the unique settings of Chinese universities. The methodology is meticulously designed to align with the research questions, aiming to delve into how universities and faculty adapt to and navigate the expectations and challenges posed by this initiative. Data collection methods encompass a blend of interviews with key stakeholders across government and university settings, document analysis, and observational studies, offering a comprehensive view of the initiative's adaptation at both the micro (organizational behavior) and macro (policy implications) levels. My study is structured to examine the "Double First-Class" initiative's ramifications, focusing specifically on faculty recruitment and development and bolstering international collaborations as crucial mechanisms for achieving research and educational excellence. I plan to go beyond surface-level policy implementation by employing a qualitative research approach, aiming to unearth the initiative's underlying strategies, challenges, and opportunities. It includes an extensive interview process with various stakeholders—faculty, administrators, and policymakers—to gain diverse insights into the initiative's operationalization and response. The methodological framework ensures a deep engagement with the subject matter, facilitating an understanding of Chinese higher education institutions' experiences and strategic adaptations in response to this significant policy effort.

V. DATA AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The research into China's "Double First-Class" initiative harnesses an evidence base, combining qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, including university faculty administrators and policymakers, with a review of program-specific documents like policy directives and reports on international collaborations. This compilation of first-person accounts and official records ensures a comprehensive understanding of the initiative's direct response to the stakeholders' experiences and the strategic institutional changes it prompts within the landscape of Chinese higher education. I employ thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the collected data, focusing on faculty recruitment, development, international collaborations, and subsequent institutional adaptations.

VI. IMPLICATION OF THE ARGUMENT

The implications of these findings are diverse. For policymakers, the study underscores the need for more research about resource allocation and policy implementation that acknowledges and addresses institutions' diverse starting points and capacities. There is a clear call for university administrators to balance pursuing research excellence with preserving a holistic educational ethos that aligns initiative goals and local needs. Academically, the study reveals that faculty development and curriculum reforms must be carefully tailored to align with the initiative's objectives while supporting the broader educational mission of fostering critical thinking, inclusivity, and social equity.

The nuanced understanding of the "Double First-Class" initiative's impact suggests several implications. For one, policymakers must consider the diversity of institutional contexts in their future planning and resource distribution. A one-size-fits-all approach may exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine the holistic development of the higher education ecosystem. Therefore, tailored strategies that consider each university's strengths, challenges, and strategic objectives are crucial.

For university administrators, the findings advocate for a balanced approach that does not solely prioritize research output and global rankings but also invests in creating a robust educational environment. This includes nurturing critical thinking, creativity, and social responsibility among students, alongside advancing research and international collaboration.

VII. IMPORTANCE OF THE ARGUMENT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

As higher education becomes increasingly central to national competitiveness and individual empowerment in a global knowledge economy, understanding the differential adaptation of excellence initiatives such as China's "Double First-Class" is crucial. This study contributes to the worldwide discourse on educational reforms by highlighting the complexity of policy implementation in diverse institutional environments and presenting a framework for evaluating the efficacy of such initiatives.

Moreover, the findings advocate for a more equitable and strategic approach to developing higher education that could be instructive for other nations pursuing similar excellence initiatives. The study's insights into the multifaceted nature of achieving world-class university status have the potential to inform international best practices and foster a more collaborative global educational environment. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing evolution of higher education policy and practice, aiming to enhance the quality and impact of higher education institutions worldwide.

The arguments and findings from this study contribute to a broader discourse on higher education reform, not just within China but globally. As nations grapple with the challenges and opportunities of the knowledge economy, understanding the complex dynamics of excellence initiatives becomes increasingly important. The study's insights offer valuable lessons for other countries embarking on or refining their own excellence initiatives.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of fostering a collaborative global educational ecosystem. By sharing best practices, challenges, and innovations, institutions can learn from each other and collectively advance the quality and impact of higher education. This collaborative approach is crucial in addressing global challenges, promoting social equity, and fostering innovation.

Ultimately, the study calls for a more nuanced and strategic approach to developing world-class universities—a vision that transcends mere rankings to encompass the broader goals of education in fostering societal progress and individual empowerment. Through this lens, the "Double First-Class" initiative not only seeks to elevate China's position in the global academic landscape but also contributes to the ongoing evolution of global higher education practices and policies.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions from this study indicate that the "Double First-Class" initiative is functioning as a transformative force within Chinese higher education. Still, its adaptation varies significantly across different academic units. The Institutional Theory framework has revealed that while some units have successfully embraced the initiative's standards in faculty development, curriculum innovation, and internationalization, others face systemic tensions that stem from resource disparity and the dual pressures of meeting global benchmarks while maintaining comprehensive educational integrity. These observations suggest that achieving world-class status is not merely a function of policy declaration but requires a nuanced consideration of institutional contexts and existing disparities.

Expanding on the emergent conclusions, implications of the argument, and the importance of the argument for higher education, we can delve deeper into each of these sections to flesh out more nuanced insights and implications derived from the study on China's "Double First-Class" initiative.

Building on the initial conclusions, it's evident that the "Double First-Class" initiative serves as a catalyst for significant transformations within the landscape of Chinese higher education, with its effects manifesting variably across different institutions and disciplines. This variability underscores the complexity of institutional change, which does not occur uniformly but is instead shaped by a myriad of factors including institutional legacy, governance models, and existing capacities for research and innovation.

Moreover, the study highlights a critical tension between the aspiration for global competitiveness and the maintenance of comprehensive educational values. This tension is particularly palpable in institutions where the pursuit of international benchmarks might come at the expense of broader educational objectives, such as fostering a well-rounded student experience and addressing local and national educational needs.

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