



Research article

# A View on the Development of Higher Education Consumption Concept in China from the Perspective of University Evaluation

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## Abstract

University evaluation, as an important means of university management, is not only a test of the quality of the university education, but also the publicity of the values of university education. Through reviewing the development history of Chinese university evaluation and analyzing the changes of the main points of concern, we can clearly see the development and changes of higher education consumption concept of the two main bodies.

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**Keywords:** University evaluation; higher education; consumption concept; Chinese universities

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## 1. Introduction

Education consumption is one of the hot spots of social consumption, which refers to the behavior and process of individuals or families receiving education, consuming various services of education departments and relevant departments, so as to meet their needs of knowledge and skills growth (Jin X.B., 2003). According to statistics, higher education consumption accounts for the largest proportion of the whole education consumption. In China, the rise of higher education consumption began with the promulgation of "The Decision of the CPC



Central Committee on the Reform of Education System" in 1985. Through the implementation of the document, the state has changed from bearing all costs to sharing higher education expenses with individuals (Tai F.I., 2010). With the improvement of living standards and the enhancement of education willingness of Chinese residents, the proportion of higher education consumption in personal consumption is gradually increasing.

The evaluation and supervision of consumption is an important function of the market, so the university evaluation as an important way of quality supervision also rises. According to statistics, from 1985 to now, more than 40 university evaluation results have been published officially and unofficially in China. These university evaluations can be regarded as the test of university quality, and also can be regarded as a kind of propaganda of university value, which plays the role of advertisement. Evaluation influences consumers' views on universities. At the same time, the needs of higher education consumers affect the focus and preference of university evaluation. Therefore, the author thinks that the change of the focus of university evaluation in China can reflect the change of consumption view of higher education consumers to a certain extent.

## **2. The history of university evaluation in China**

### **2.1 The development of official evaluation**

As early as 1954, the Chinese government evaluated and divided universities into key and non key ones. Although the number of schools involved was small, it had great authority and was regarded as an important standard to judge the quality and level of universities. After the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978, the Chinese government began to carry out the research and practice of higher education evaluation in a planned way. For example, in 1978, the Chinese Academy of Management Sciences ranked 40 comprehensive and engineering universities in China according to the number of papers published in international authoritative journals. In 1990, the State Education Commission promulgated the "Interim Provisions on the Education Evaluation of Ordinary Colleges and Universities", which clearly stipulated the purpose, task, guiding ideology and basic form of higher education evaluation, which was the first regulation on higher education evaluation in China. Since then, the evaluation of universities with the national and government education departments as the main body gradually risen. In 1995, the Academic Degree and Graduate Education Evaluation Institute evaluated 33 pilot graduate schools in China and formed the 1994 China Graduate School ranking list. The Ministry of education established the teaching evaluation center of higher education in 2004, which indicates that the teaching evaluation of China's higher education has begun to move towards the stage of standardization, scientificity, institutionalization and specialization. In 2006, the Ministry of Education organized the evaluation of the teaching level of 133 universities. Since 2002, the Academic Degree and Graduate Education Development Center of the Ministry of education has evaluated the overall level of the first-class disciplines with postgraduate training and degree granting qualifications.

### **2.2 The development of social evaluation**

The university evaluation organized by research institutions and social organizations started after "The Promulgation of the Interim Provisions on Education Evaluation of Ordinary Colleges and Universities", which clearly encouraged academic institutions and social organizations to participate in education evaluation. In June 1993, Wu Shulian, a researcher at Guangdong Academy of Management Sciences, published the first university ranking in China, namely "evaluation of Chinese Universities - research and development in 1991", with objective evaluation and quantitative evaluation as the core. In 1999, LaiBiGe information technology (Shenzhen) Co., Ltd. published the "1999 Chinese University ranking list", which was subsequently published on the website of "Netbig". The evaluation claims to be the first domestic ranking list made from the perspective of consumers, so as to play the role of social evaluation, so that consumers can understand the development of colleges and



universities horizontally and dynamically (Xie Y.L., 2010). In 2004, the China Science Evaluation and research center of Wuhan University published the “comprehensive competitiveness evaluation report of Chinese universities”, ranking the general universities and key universities respectively. In 2003, “Alumni Network” started to carry out research on university evaluation jointly with "21st century talent daily", which is the first university ranking originated from online evaluation in China. Also in 2003, the world-class university research center of the Institute of higher education of Shanghai Jiao Tong University published the Academic Ranking of World Universities(ARWU) for the first time through its website, which is the first global university ranking with multiple indicators.

### 3. The focus of university evaluation in China

#### 3.1 Overall change of evaluation

Looking back on the development process and concerns of China's major official evaluation and social evaluation (Table 1&2), the more significant change is that the early university evaluation in China was mainly based on the ranking of scientific research achievements, focusing on science and engineering majors, and completely based on open objective data, the index of ranking evaluation was relatively single (Xin Y.H. & Hu X.Y., 1998). The data on which these evaluations are based include the national collection of scientific and Technological Statistics of colleges and universities, Science Citation Index(SCI), The Engineering Index(EI), etc. In the middle and late 1990s, both official evaluation and social evaluation are constantly changing. The basic trend was to evaluate the University's contribution to the country or society, covering science and engineering, humanities, art and other disciplines. Based on objective data and paying attention to subjective value judgment, the evaluation indicators are more complete and comprehensive.

**Table 1.** Major official evaluations and their contents

Time	Name of Evaluation	Evaluation organization	Contents of evaluation
1954-1978	National Key Universities	Designated by the CPC Central Committee (1954-1960)、 Ministry of Education (1963)、 State Council (1978)	Training high quality cadres of science and technology and theoretical work
1978-2000	universities with graduate school	State Council (1978-1986)、 Ministry of Education (2000)	The quality of undergraduate and postgraduate education, the structure of teaching staff, the professional level of main disciplines, the level of scientific research, the management system of graduate education
1987-1989	Ranking of University scientometrics	Institute of science, Chinese Academy of Management Sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of papers in SCI (1987)</li> <li>• Number of papers in SCI &amp; EI (1988)</li> <li>• The number of papers published at home and abroad, the number of patents approved, the number of national awards (1989)</li> </ul>
1994	"211 Project" construction	State Education Commission	School running idea, leading group, teaching and living infrastructure, undergraduate education level, education development plan
1995	Ranking of graduate schools in China in 1994	Evaluation Center for degree and graduate education	Postgraduate training and quality, discipline construction and effectiveness, institutional construction of graduate school
1998-2013	“985 Project” construction	Higher education teaching evaluation center of the Ministry of Education	Cultivate creative talents, solve scientific frontier problems, transform science and technology, cultural exchange



Time	Name of Evaluation	Evaluation organization	Contents of evaluation
2003-2006 2014-2018	Evaluation of undergraduate teaching level	Ministry of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School running ideology, teaching staff, teaching conditions, specialty construction and teaching reform, teaching management, study style, teaching effect and characteristic projects (2004)</li> <li>• The adaptability of school running orientation and personnel training objectives to the needs of national and regional economic development, the guarantee degree of teachers and teaching resources, the effectiveness of teaching and quality assurance system operation, and the satisfaction of students and social employers (2013)</li> </ul>
Since 2002	Subject assessment	Ministry of education degree and Graduate Education Development Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic team, scientific research, personnel training and academic reputation (2002-2008)</li> <li>• Teachers and resources, scientific research level, talent training quality and discipline reputation (since 2012)</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Major social evaluations and their contents

Time	Name of evaluation	Evaluation organization	Contents of evaluation
1993	University Evaluation in China - research and development (1993, 1997-2000)	Guangdong Academy of Management Sciences, Wu Shulian	Personnel training and scientific research
1999	1999 Chinese University Rankings	LaiBiGe information technology (Shenzhen) Co., Ltd	Academic reputation, expert rating, published papers, quality of freshmen, teaching staff, research funding
Since 2004	Evaluation report on comprehensive competitiveness of Chinese Universities	China Science Evaluation and research center of Wuhan University	School resources, teaching level, scientific research and school reputation
2006-2007	Ranking of scientific research competitiveness of World Universities	China Science Evaluation and research center of Wuhan University	Productivity, influence, innovation and development of scientific research
Since 1999	Ranking of Chinese Universities	Netbig website	Reputation, academic resources, academic achievements, students, teachers and material resources
Since 2003	Research Report on University Evaluation	China Alumni Association Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National investment, school reputation, faculty, scientific research and academic (2004)</li> <li>• Add "outstanding alumni" index (2006)</li> <li>• Talent cultivation, scientific research and comprehensive reputation (since 2007)</li> </ul>
Since 2003	Academic Ranking of World Universities	Institute of higher education, Shanghai Jiaotong University	The quality of education, the quality of teachers, the achievements of scientific research and the performance of Teachers



### **3.2 Changes of the evaluation focus**

Since the 1990s, the focus of university evaluation in China has gradually changed in six aspects.

First, university evaluation begins to pay attention to the development of Humanities and social sciences. Since 1993, the university evaluation research group of Guangdong Academy of Management Sciences first launched the university ranking list including philosophy, humanities and social science activities. The database such as "the compilation of social science statistics of national colleges and universities" and Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) are widely used. Not only the development of Humanities and social sciences has been paid attention to, but also higher requirements for the balance of discipline structure have been put forward. At the same time, more attention has been paid to the cultivation of humanistic feelings and artistic quality in personnel training.

Second, university evaluation begins to pay attention to more comprehensive content. China's university evaluation gradually adopts the school running concept and guiding ideology, teaching staff (including team structure, teaching level and scientific research level and management), college education, research education, scientific research, school management and efficiency (including education and scientific research management, teaching and learning facilities management, logistics management and comprehensive benefits of the University). This change is also reflected in the increase in the number of indicators in the evaluation index system. For example, the evaluation index of the university evaluation research group of Guangdong Academy of Management Sciences increased from 25 indicators in 1993 to 42 indicators in 1997 (Han Z., 2004).

Third, university evaluation begins to pay attention to the social service function of Universities. The state requires that the university evaluation should pay attention to the contribution of the university to the country. For example, undergraduate teaching evaluation puts forward the idea of index setting of "the orientation of running a school and the adaptability of talent training objectives to the needs of national and regional economic development", and Wu Shulian puts forward the index setting idea of "contribution to society as the only measurement standard". The evaluation results are used to measure the satisfaction of universities to the needs of all sectors of society.

Fourth, university evaluation adjusts the structure and time of evaluation. On the one hand, the index structure is gradually biased and the relative quantity comparison is introduced. For example, the 1992 "evaluation of science and technology activities of 86 key universities in China from 1985 to 1989" adopted different weights for different achievements for the first time, and then introduced relative indicators such as student teacher ratio and student per capita funding into the evaluation indicators. On the other hand, we start to consider the historical accumulation of universities in terms of time. For example, the ranking of universities on Alumni Network takes "University's contribution ability to science and talents" as the standard to "rank universities by combining history and reality", which is the biggest feature of university evaluation research report different from other university rankings at home and abroad (Deng C.C., 2011).

Fifth, university evaluation begins to focus on subjective value judgment. On one hand, the setting of indicators has changed from completely based on objective data to the combination of objective quantitative indicators and subjective value judgment (Deng C.C., 2011). For example, subject evaluation is subjective evaluation of "discipline reputation" made by peer experts and industry people according to the academic reputation, social contribution, academic ethics and other impressions of the discipline and with reference to the introduction of science (Ren Y.C., 2014). On the other hand, the subjective will of the audience is respected in the evaluation methods and publishing channels. For example, the university ranking data, evaluation index system and weight of the university rankings of Alumni Network are determined by people's voting through the network.

Sixth, the focus of university evaluation is separated. Separation of concerns is a systematic thinking method



to deal with the complexity of university comprehensive evaluation. In order to more truly and accurately reflect the development of universities, various university evaluations, while launching comprehensive evaluation, rank graduate education and disciplines as separate items. For example, "China University Evaluation - 1998" evaluates universities from the perspective of Universities' contribution to society, and "China University Evaluation - 1998 Graduate School" refers to students' receiving the best education Evaluation of the University.

#### **4. The changes of consumption view of higher education**

The concept of consumption is the guiding ideology and attitude towards disposable income and the orientation of pursuing commodity value. It is also the overall cognition and value judgment of consumer subject on consumption object, consumption behavior mode, consumption process and consumption trend when consumers conduct or prepare for consumption activities. Therefore, the consumption view of higher education is the consumer's evaluation and value judgment of university education products, education methods, education process and so on. In addition, higher education has the dual attributes of consumption and investment, and the consumption view of higher education should also include the value prediction of the return on education investment. In terms of the proportion of investment in higher education and the degree of participation in the process, the state and individuals are the main consumers.

##### **4.1 From scale to quality**

Since 1999, in order to solve the contradiction between insufficient supply and strong demand in the higher education market, China's higher education has focused on the expansion of its scale. The State encourages universities to continuously expand the number of students. It was proposed that the gross enrollment rate of higher education will reach 15% of the school-age youth by 2010. In the context of expanding the enrollment scale of universities, the decline of education quality and the problem of students' employment gradually became prominent. In 2002, the gross enrollment rate of higher education reached the expected target of 15%. China entered the stage of popularization of higher education eight years ahead of the original plan. The development focus of higher education began to shift to improving the quality. In 2003, the state launched the teaching quality and teaching reform project in Colleges and universities. By means of teaching evaluation and other means, emphasis was placed on the level and quality evaluation in the setting of evaluation indicators, so as to monitor and urge the improvement of university education quality. In 2010, "the outline of national medium and long term education reform and development plan (2010-2020)" clearly put forward that "improving quality is the core of education reform". In 2012, the Ministry of Education issued "some opinions on comprehensively improving the quality of higher education". On the one hand, it made clear that the enrollment scale of undergraduate students in public colleges and universities would be relatively stable. On the other hand, in order to improve the quality of teaching, a series of measures such as "professors should teach undergraduates" were adopted. In the official university evaluation, the output index of the discipline evaluation index of the center for degree and postgraduate education development of the Ministry of education replaced the original quantitative index with "dissertation quality" and "representative academic paper quality". The state has gradually formed the quality concept of higher education consumption.

##### **4.2 From paying attention to output to emphasizing input benefit**

The early university evaluation organized by the state education department focused on the quantitative research output such as the number of papers, the number of projects presided over and participated in, which was closely related to the reality that science and education development was at the initial stage. However, it is too quantitative and single evaluation orientation, and pays too much attention to the growth of output scale, without considering the relationship between input and output, and the benefits generated by some inputs are not



satisfactory. With the development of evaluation indicators from relatively single to relatively comprehensive, the state's awareness of the cost of higher education consumption has gradually increased. In the official university evaluation indicators, in addition to absolute indicators such as input indicators, also use relative indicators such as average student index and benefit index. Through the guidance of the state, universities should respect not only the laws of education, but also the laws of economy, so as to improve the efficiency of funds. The “211 Project” and “985 Project” implemented by the state are also the efforts made to create a world-class university and build a first-class discipline after evaluating the input benefits of financial, material and human resources from the national conditions.

#### **4.3 From meeting social needs to attaching importance to human development**

Before 1990, the State paid more attention to the scientific research or talent output of natural science. On one hand, it was related to the output of natural science that was easier to quantify and master the standards. On the other hand, it was also related to the scientific research achievements of natural science and the talents cultivated, which had more practical value for the economic construction at that time. For a country facing the problem of food and clothing to be solved urgently and the economy was relatively backward, this kind of development idea was more practical, and pays attention to the direct economic and social benefits of University investment, but it might ignore the long-term development trend. This kind of development idea is limited by the reality, but it is disadvantageous to the long-term development of higher education. With the development of social economy, the focus of official university evaluation has shifted to the guiding ideology of university running, the development of humanities to meet people's spiritual needs, the effect of the quality of personnel training on students' moral, physical and aesthetic education and the cultivation of humanistic feelings, and the coordinated operation of University disciplines and faculty structure. All these reflect the state's requirement that universities should take human beings into consideration in their development and comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable.

#### **4.4 From passive acceptance of evaluation to active participation in evaluation**

In the traditional education concept, the university is the place to impart knowledge, in which individuals receive knowledge. The relationship between University and students is the relationship between education and receiving education, management and being managed. With the implementation of educational cost sharing and the influence of market economy, the subject consciousness of students and families has been enhanced. With the emergence of a large number of university social evaluation, individuals are no longer passively accepting the university education, but can actively participate in the university evaluation. In the university evaluation of alumni network, individuals can even participate in the setting of evaluation indicators. In other parts of the university rankings, alumni quality and other indicators are also set, and the status of individuals as the main consumer is gradually prominent. From the perspective of consumers, people begin to care about the quality of university education, or the basic benefits of their own input and output, and began to independently choose whether to participate in higher education. In 2011, Yang Tianping conducted a survey on the education consumption of five ordinary undergraduate colleges in Henan Province, which shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the evaluation of higher education quality by college students in Henan Province and their willingness to accept higher education (Yang T.P., 2011).

#### **4.5 From pure pursuit of education level to rational consumption**

Sociologists regard education as an important factor in the division of social stratification. According to Blau and Duncan's social stratification model, "education acquisition is the key mechanism that dominates social mobility and socio-economic acquisition, and it is the primary socio-economic 'achievement' of people entering adulthood." (David Grusky, 2005). In order to change their current situation, people take education as a necessary



way. However, the acquisition of education needs education consumption, and the amount of education consumption is directly affected by property and income. Weber believes that property, rather than talent, is actually a more important prerequisite for the process of obtaining an education diploma (Shen Z.C. & Yan F.Q., 2006). In 2010, Lin Shaozhen's investigation on education consumption in Xiamen showed that the expenditure of family education consumption basically increased with the improvement of education level. The cost of higher education was the highest, with an average of 10515.69 yuan, accounting for 33.5% of family education consumption (Lin S.Z., 2010). The consumption of many families in higher education was not compatible with the actual economic affordability. In the evaluation of modern universities, the setting of indicators such as the employment rate and the situation of graduates and the analysis of employment situation make people begin to look at the return rate of education investment more rationally. In particular, the emergence of the ranking of Vocational and technical education institutions has led people to start consciously to be more rational and pragmatic in higher education consumption according to their own abilities, interests and economic reality.

## 5. Conclusion

In the information age, the factors that affect the consumption concept of higher education involve many aspects, such as population, social economy and so on. University evaluation is the disclosure and dissemination of data and information about university development and education quality. To explore the development of consumption concept from the perspective of university evaluation, we should start from the perspective of national social participation in University supervision, based on the improvement of quality, based on the satisfaction of consumers' different levels, diversified and characteristic education consumption needs. The subject of university evaluation should give full play to the subjective initiative, scientifically and reasonably set evaluation indexes and weights, guide the consumption behavior of higher education in good faith, and put forward useful suggestions.

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