

# Chapter 6

## The Modernization of Higher Education



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In 2015, *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration* stipulated a new comprehensive goal of ensuring quality education that is inclusive and equitable for all and life-long learning opportunity by 2030. The following Framework of Education 2030 reiterated this vision, suggesting ten specific goals and strategies for action (UNESCO 2015). In response, China's *Position Paper on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda* issued by the Chinese government in 2016 proposed to "deepen the progress of modernizing education" (Pan and Li 2016).

The 18th National People's Congress (NPC) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) advanced socioeconomic change through the implementation of a national governance system and modernization of its national governing capacity. These changes have since emerged in China's higher education sector: under the jurisdiction of the CPC's State Council, the Ministry of Education implements policies and changes at all levels. However, as the base of China's prosperity, higher education is not simply an issue of initiatives to modernize governance. Rather, higher education requires modernization overall to better enable it to shoulder the responsibility of building a strong China. Accordingly, to develop higher education for a stronger China has been written into China's educational reform and development guidelines. However, this prompts the key question: what kind of higher education can best shoulder the responsibility of creating and maintaining a strong and prosperous China? The answer is the modernization of higher education (MHE). Indeed, MHE is the end, means, and foundation of the development of a Chinese higher education that will strengthen the country. As a key theoretical issue in urgent need of resolution during the process of higher educational reform in China, MHE is also a stringently practical issue in the creation of a strong higher education system. The modernization of China's higher education relies on the theoretical guidance,

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underscoring the significance of discussing MHE. This chapter addresses the following three questions: What is MHE? What are the characteristics and components of MHE? How can MHE be achieved?

## 6.1 What Is MHE?

By now, Chinese scholars defined MHE from its coverage (Research Project Group 2017), characteristics (Zhang 2010), and its process (Zhang 2000). In 2013, Professor Zhenyuan Qu, then-President of China Society of Higher Education, argued that MHE is a key objective of higher education reform and development in the new period of China. He further advanced that theorization is required before MHE can be realized (Qu 2014).

To define the concept of MHE, it is necessary to clarify the following questions: Is MHE a target-oriented or process-based concept? Is it a concept that focuses on the future or does it concern the *status quo*? Is it an internationally comparable concept or a local one? If it is a target-oriented concept, what is its target? If it is a concept focusing on the future, when is this future? If MHE is an internationally comparable concept, what is the reference nation? Since they pertain to MHE, these basic theoretical issues are inevitable. As such, in order to have a clearer understanding of MHE, this section briefly reviews the historical backgrounds of how definition of modernization in China was coming in shape in a few decades.

China has been an advocate and pursuer of modernization. It was at the first session of the third NPC, held in December 1964, that China's Premier, Enlai Zhou, first mentioned the concept of "Four Modernizations"—namely Industrial Modernization, Agricultural Modernization, National Defense Modernization, and Science and Technology Modernization—based on the suggestions of Zedong Mao. Zhou also set a target of achieving these "Four Modernizations" within a period of 30 years. In the first 15 years, China endeavored to establish an independent and complete industrial and national economic system in an effort to make China's industry globally advanced by world standards. In the remaining 15 years, China sought to play a leading role in industry and realize the modernization of its agriculture, industry, national defense, as well as science and technology by the end of the twentieth century.

In December 1979, however, Xiaoping Deng argued the aforementioned modernization was too vague, advancing the concept of modernization as the realization of moderate prosperity instead. In 1984, he defined "moderate prosperity" as achieving US\$ 800 GDP per capita by the end of the twentieth century, thereby facilitating a concrete and operational data reference for China's modernization. With the increase of China's GDP per capita, at its 17th NPC in October 2007, the CPC proposed a target of realizing all-round moderate prosperity in the first 20 years of the twenty-first century and achieving a jump from US\$ 1000 to US\$ 3000 GDP per capita. China's GDP per capita reached US\$ 6100 in 2012. Therefore, after the 18th NPC, the CPC revised and redefined its "Four Modernizations" to industrialization,

digitalization, urbanization, and agricultural modernization. As such, China's socio-economic modernization is both locally defined and internationally comparable that focuses on a certain period in the future, while having a quantitatively measurable target. That is to say, the concept of modernization has been continuously adjusted and improved with the development of society.

In 1983, Deng used the slogan "Education should be oriented toward modernization, to the world and to the future" to first propose the modernization of education in China. However, it appears to have been Boling Zhang, founder of Nankai University in Tianjin, who first linked education with modernization. Asked the purpose of education during a speech at Nankai High School, Zhang answered that "the purpose of education is to use education to modernize China and to make China properly position in the world, avoid of being eliminating from the world" (Cui 1997: 208). As such, Zhang realized that the purpose of education was to save and strengthen China. In contrast to both Zhang and the "Four Modernizations," Deng's time-free and data-free expression of "Three Orientations" of education delineated the future direction of China's education reform and development. "Three Orientations" education remains methodologically significant to our understanding of the modernization of education. As such, the modernization of education is hardly an independent concept; rather, its interpretation cannot be separated from the world and the future.

This prompts the following question: can we define MHE based on our understanding of "Three Orientations" education, while referring to the modernization of the economy and society? Based on my previous research (Sui 2009: 2014), MHE, as a relative and contextualized concept, can be defined as a target system and effort making with reference to the most advanced international higher education, reflecting the best status of current or future higher education development.

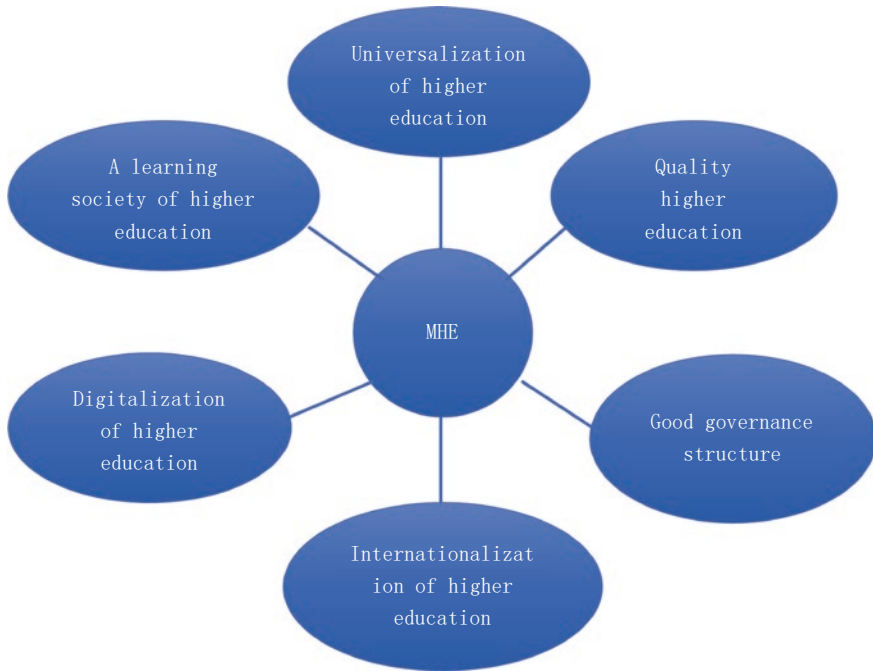
## 6.2 What Are the Characteristics and Components of MHE?

Based on the previous definition of MHE, we can argue that the characteristics of MHE are not a reflection of its internal independent components; rather, it is a collective presentation of many similar special relationships between the internal and external factors of higher education. These relationships can be summarized as follows. First, MHE is both an internationally comparable and international target, as well as a process focused on the local context. Second, MHE highlights both quantity and quality and is a combination of elite and universal education. Third, MHE is the target of future higher education and directs its development, thus both the process and status of higher education development. Fourth, MHE originates from the needs of national competition and modernization, leads the development of the nation's modernization, and constitutes the essential base of the nation's modernization. Fifth, MHE is a modernization of the macro governance system of higher education, as well as that of university leaders' capacity to govern the university.

Finally, MHE is a combination of the modernization of higher education ideologies, content, approaches, and methods.

As such, the concept of MHE is hardly an isolated and abstract concept. Rather, it is an umbrella concept comprising a set of higher education components or expressions showing some of the conditions of higher education, whether as a target or process. Since MHE is a complex status and process of higher education development in which many factors have been involved, it is *impossible to use one term to depict MHE and its process*. Some scholars identified four indicators, namely scale, input, quality, and effectiveness, to evaluate MHE (Ling and Yu 2015). Based on the definition given in the part 1, there are six components of MHE identified in the following:

1. *Universalization of higher education*. This refers to the aim of at least 50% of school-aged people having access to higher education (Martin 1973). It is the threshold target of realizing MHE on the initial stage.
2. *Quality higher education*. There are such two core missions of higher education as cultivating talents and contributing new knowledge. Without adequate quality and effectiveness, scale and quantity, for example, cannot justify a genuine MHE.
3. *Good governance structure*. An effective governing structure puts efficiency first, engages democratic management, embraces an overall design, and is guaranteed by laws and regulations. This constitutes the institutional premise and organizational environment for assuring MHE.
4. *Internationalization of higher education*. MHE itself is an internationally comparable concept, representing the most advanced and highest level of a nation's higher education. Therefore, the internalization of higher education is the most important component of MHE and is discussed greater detail in the third section of this article.
5. *Digitalization of higher education*. In addition to changing people's lives and production, the prevailing modern ICT and its rapid progress have challenged traditional higher education in terms of its concepts, methods, and approaches—bringing higher education into the new era of education. With the expansive development of open online courses (MOOCs), higher education resources are no longer monopolized by a small number of universities and are not a privilege of certain knowledge elites. The modernization of ICT has challenged higher education greatly, changing the ways and approaches of traditional higher education, the concept of traditional higher education, and the significance of their existence. However, modern ICT has not challenged traditional higher education subversively. Rather, the all-round trend of digitalization of higher education (e.g., MOOCs) and the challenges it has brought have been recognized by societies around the world and are regarded as a developmental trend and the future direction of higher education.
6. *A learning society of higher education*. A learning society is fundamentally different from a qualification-based society. Instead of specifically targeting specific qualifications within a specified period, higher education learning will



**Fig. 6.1** The components of MHE

become a lifestyle, a leisure, and a lifelong education pursued to satisfy interests and update knowledge. As an ideal of higher education, a higher education learning society is actually a type of social status with open learning time and space, diverse learning content, equal learning opportunities, plenary learners, and subjective learning processes. Such a learning society not only reflects the social pursuit of lifelong higher education but also provides a foundation from which to achieve higher learning in one's lifespan. Arguably, a learning society of higher education could be the final target of MHE.

While it may be possible to identify other indicators of MHE, these six components are indispensable (Fig. 6.1).

### 6.3 How Can MHE Be Achieved?

While higher education in China has witnessed remarkable progress in the past few decades, a significant gap remains between China and other countries with a strong higher education. China only gets ahead of scale of higher education, not to mention the efficiency and quality. As a result, there is an urgent to speed up the process of MHE in China. Of course, MHE characterized by the attainment of the highest level

and comprehensive strengthening of higher education takes time to achieve. Given the importance of MHE and the indispensability of higher education for strengthening the nation, the issue of how to speed up and achieve MHE is urgent. Successful experiences of China's tremendous socioeconomic changes since the third session of the 11th NPC can best be summarized by two keywords: "reform" and "opening-up."

Therefore, since the 18th NPC, the new leadership teams of the central government of China have persistently practiced deep reform and are opening-up to facilitate the realization of China's dream. As an important and complex system in China's national system, higher education is also experiencing significant revolution and revitalization. Therefore, the only way to realize MHE is through reform and opening-up.

### ***6.3.1 MHE Achieved from Higher Education Reform***

China recently released three development outlines for 2010–2020: namely, the "Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Science and Technology Development," "Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Talent Development," and the "Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development." "Reform to develop" has reiterated the three policy papers. In fact, there are two reasons why educational reform should come first in educational development. First, education is a complex social activity involving the largest number of social stakeholders with vested but diversified interests. Second, there are numerous problems that remain unresolved, while the sophisticated interlinkages between education and the government, society, the school system, and students have yet to be tidied-up. Moreover, the educational ideal intertwines with educational practice. These dynamics have constituted certain conflicts in and barriers to educational development, particularly to MHE. Reform is the undoubtedly the driving force and means of promoting MHE.

Higher education is a complex system with both uniformity and diversity, including many components and stakeholders. Moreover, the internal issues of higher education intertwine with its external factors. Therefore, higher education reform is a systematic project in which change to one aspect will affect the whole system. Thus, we must have a good understanding of the complexity of higher education. A one-sided, isolated, and static reform and solution could possibly solve temporary problems or part of the problems, achieving immediate outcomes; it, however, cannot resolve the problem fundamentally (Sui 2014a, b). One way to reduce the uncertainty and complexity during the systematic reform of higher education is to engage in a comprehensive and systematic top-level approach toward the process, thereby preventing fragmented reform.

### 6.3.2 *MHE Achieved via the Internalization of Higher Education*

Given the idiosyncratic national contexts and historical-institutional paths, national higher education systems still share fundamental missions as an open social system in pursuit of efficiency and quality. As an open system, the general feature of higher education requires that it constantly absorbs external resources and energy in order to improve its efficiency and quality; rather than a closed or an isolated system that does not engage in resource and energy exchange with the external world, which is actually quite compatible with the concept of higher education internationalization.

The internalization of higher education is an activity and process that aims to improve higher education development and quality; it also endeavors to promote the sharing and mobility successful experiences, scientific technology, facilities, talents, and information by opening the higher education system and communicating and cooperating with international higher education providers (Pu and Sui 2016). Internationalization, thus, constitutes an effective approach to reaching the most advanced level of higher education in the world in the shortest time by learning and borrowing from more advanced methods, experiences, and technology. Consequently, as indicated by the previous discussion of MHE, higher education internationalization is not only a means and a key point of MHE but also an indispensable component reflecting MHE. As Jane Knight among others has concluded: “It is doubtless that the integration of higher education into the outside world appears to be urgent” (Zhang 2012: 17).

In an era in which knowledge has played an increasingly decisive role, higher education has become a symbol of a nation’s strength. Without a modernized and strong system of higher education, we are left asking what else could be relied upon to advance the country and realize the dream of a strong China lies the significance and purpose of studying MHE, as well as the commitment to speeding up the process of MHE.

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