Three Challenges of Internationalization and Peking University’s Strategic Choices

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We are now living in an era of internationalization. As far as colleges and universities are concerned, the traditional college education, fundamentally characterized with the “academic loneliness”, has been replaced with the university unions, regional or global, with the capacities of large-scaled expansion in the enrollment of international students, of the high-density international academic conferences, of the transnational scientific researches, and of the professional training. There have occurred some alterations in the interrelationships between university and state, between university and society, and between university and market. Internationalization has penetrated into various aspects of university education, such as professional training, disciplines construction, curriculum arrangement, personnel management, student administration, and staff exchange, etc.

The administrators of universities nowadays are discussing internationalization. What, then, does internationalization mean for universities in China, the largest developing country in the world? And how should we, in the background of internationalization, program and manage our universities?

Internationalization has for sure brought to us tremendous opportunities for development. For instance, we can share the courses and teaching force with the first-class universities in the developed countries, which can make it possible to help improve teaching of our universities; we can help faculty and students with more experiences of learning abroad by which to widen their horizon; and we can also enroll more international students for more multiplicity of our campuses; etc. The opportunities, however, have been fully considered, and what I want to emphasize today is the three challenges of internationalization.

The first challenge lies in the impact of internationalization upon the traditional and special features of our own university education. Internationalization does not mean all the universities in the world should be run in one pattern, though such danger has been implied in reality. Many societies, simultaneously, are imitating the American model of university education. We, however, must recognize the fact that the American model is not the exclusively successful one. We, but rather, should learn widely from the successful experiences of other countries when we maintain the traditional advantages of our own system.

Higher education internationalization has resulted in some common criteria for university education. It has been realized in some countries that the universally unified criteria for the enrollment of the students have been adopted, the unified curriculum patterns implemented, and the unified diplomas granted in certain disciplines and fields of study, such as economics, administration, medicine and engineering, etc. In the recent years, the so-called world programs, such as MBA, MPA, and etc. have developed in the typical tendency of curriculum globalization. The disciplines and fields of study, which, in a sense, have surpassed the national differences in politics, economy, culture and education system, and have become the universally unified-criteria programs. However, whether or not can this affect the special features of our colleges and universities? And whether or not should we be aware of this kind of dangers?

Secondly, one of the outcomes of university internationalization lies in the closer interrelationship between university and society. Universities, which have become the most active factors in the society, aim at the discovery,
research and dissemination of knowledge. The market law and the social demand have exerted more and more impacts upon the development of universities, which, correspondingly, are developing along with the development and change of the society. Universities are moving from the periphery of the society to its center.

It can be seen, thereby, that the rapid development of the disciplines and fields related to law, commerce, engineering and other managing or applied knowledge in various universities has made it possible to enroll a lot more talented students, whereas the traditional disciplines, such as literature, history and philosophy in universities, have encountered a severe challenge, for the choice of such disciplines probably means the life-long low-income or neglect.

The market-oriented tendency has challenged the traditional missions of universities: whether or not can we keep firmly in the independence, freedom and dignity of our academic world?

Thirdly, it must be admitted that higher education internationalization has not only been influenced more and more by the tide of economic globalization, but also been driven by commercial profit and economic interest. International competition has become more and more severe on the aspects, such as the enrollment of the international students and the transnational education. The developed countries enjoy a status of superiority in that they can earn considerable annual income from the education of the international students, and the developing countries, however, have lost enormous talented students. This, too, is another huge challenge, with which we have to cope seriously.

In face of the opportunities and challenges brought by internationalization, China’s universities must reform the system actively and endeavor to pursue the coordination of “size, structure, quality and efficiency”. This, too, is our necessary choice of the participation in the global higher education competition.

I hereinafter illustrate briefly the strategic choices made by Peking University for the challenge of internationalization.

First, Peking University will take an active part in the process of internationalization, and we, however, will stick not only to the tradition and features of Peking University, but also to the independent value system.

We, of course, cannot keep ourselves away from the reality of the developing society, nor can we ignore the demands of the market. We, however, cannot treat university operation as commercial activity. It is still the spirit of university ideal to stick to institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Universities can not act as the thermometer, responding to each social fashion. Universities, based on the comparatively independent value system, should keep certain distance from the society on the stand of rational criticism, only by means of which can the rationalism spirit be maintained forever.

Second, Peking University will continue to attach high importance to the development of the basic disciplines when it is vigorously developing the disciplines, such as the interdisciplines, the emerging disciplines and the applied disciplines.

With the challenge of utilitarianism, I think the applied disciplines, of course, should be heavily developed with more investment, but the first-class university education should seek for the balance not only between “generalists” and “specialists”, but also between “theory” and “practice”, because the broad fundamental knowledge and the steady ability of basic research serve as foundations of the talents. A lot of advanced technologies and great inventions originate not from the utilitarian purposes of invention and creation, but from the passionate pursuit for fundamental knowledge and basic research, which embodies the distillation of scientific spirit, scientific methods, thinking innovation and down-to-earth attitude. In the first-class university education, therefore, importance must be attached not only to the fundamental disciplines, which depends on the accumulation of knowledge, but also to the academic values, culturally, ideologically, and spiritually.

Third, Peking University will endeavor to become a “community” of the cross cultural exchange on the prerequisite of inheriting its own cultural tradition.

Along with the development of higher education internationalization, universities bear more and more pressures on the participation in the global competition. Essentially, the exchange among universities throughout the world requires that the education and cultivation in various fields should help the better understanding of the world issues, of the role of the high-quality human resources, and of the necessity of the co-existence of different cultures. On the prerequisite of inheriting its own cultural tradition, Peking University should do something more to participate in the global competition, to strengthen the educational concepts for international understanding and peace of the world.

The internationalization of the first-class universities requires inheritance as well as reference, namely, we should not only uphold the great tradition and cultural heritage accumulated in our nation, but also absorb the advanced
experiences in higher education of other countries. We object not only to “ethno centralism” in the cross cultural exchange, but also to the complete imitation of a certain foreign pattern at the cost of the loss of our own features. We advocate that the gap of the higher education between the developing countries and the developed ones should be bridged by means of mutual complement, mutual enjoyment, and promotion of cooperation, so that the partnership of international education, based on mutual interest, mutual goal, mutual respect, and mutual trust, could really be established, in order to serve the emerging knowledge society.

Internationalization is a two-way approach. To change the one-way situation in which a lot of Chinese students are “exported” with a long-term imbalance, and to become a cross cultural “community”, China’s universities should strengthen their advantages by “importing” more international students so that Chinese students could have more chances to experiences foreign cultures, so that, they could obtain the ability of cultural coherence. Thus, in the education of first-class universities, we should widen international horizon, reinforce the education of the international concepts, such as global ethics, ethical responsibility, environmental protection, racial equality, human understanding, and global happiness, etc., and cultivate the “talented students with world view”.

The Chinese government is advocating to build a harmonious world. And I hold that, in the realization of harmonious civilizations and mutual prosperity, universities will play an important role.

The three points mentioned above are the strategic choices put forth by Peking University. They are also the strategic goals we expect to actualize. I expect a further dialog with the administrators of universities and educators, and I hope for an incessant development of the cooperation between Peking University and its sister universities all over the world. Thank you!