

The modernizing turn in higher education in the context of neoliberalism

Mingjia Gao

Department of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100875, China

Abstract

Since the mid-1980s, the idea of neoliberalism has gradually penetrated into the field of higher education, and has had a profound impact on higher education. This paper discusses the challenges posed by neoliberalism to higher education and the modernization of higher education in this context, aiming at promoting the re-modernization of higher education and realizing the sustainable development of human society and higher education itself.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, Higher education, Modernizing turn.

1. Introduction

Higher education, as an important link in modern society for cultivating talents and promoting economic development and social progress, plays a supporting and leading role in the construction of a strong nation. The rise of neoliberalism makes higher education gradually shift from the old agreement mode to the relationship mode of new contract, and also makes higher education face unprecedented challenges. This paper discusses the development trend of higher education in the context of neoliberalism and puts forward the contingent turn of the modernization of higher education by sorting out the rise of neoliberalism and its impact on higher education.

2. The rise of neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a kind of economic and political trend that has emerged globally since the second half of the 20th century and developed from classical liberalism. It was initially an economic policy adopted by western countries such as Britain and the United States to overcome the economic “stagflation” crisis at that time, with Britain's “Margaret Thatcher's privatization policy” and the United States' “Reaganomics” being the most representative. Among them, Britain's “Margaret Thatcher's privatization policy” and the United States' “Reaganomics” are the most representative. The core policy advocates liberalization, marketization and privatization, and opposes government intervention in the economy, believing that as long as all kinds of obstacles and interventions are removed, and the market mechanism is allowed to function spontaneously, human beings will be able to reach the most desirable of all possible conditions(Chen & Zhang, 2019). In the whole range of social activities, education is one of the areas that have been greatly influenced by the neoliberal ideology. In all countries, education is seen as a public matter and is controlled by the government, however, the neoliberal viewpoints have led to a change in the way people perceive education. Education is a quasi-public good that should be provided by the private sector or the third sector(Zhang, 2014), as it enhances the status of the individual and gives him or her more opportunities for development, and has a certain degree of self-interest.

Neoliberalism representative Friedman pointed out in the article “the role of the government in education”: The public education system lacks the necessary constraints of market competition, inefficiency, waste of resources; to change this situation, the only way out is to take the market-oriented road corps (Zhang, 2014). Education to introduce the market and competition mechanism, in like a business established on the basis of economic efficiency considerations, reduce all state intervention and financial support. For higher education, traditionally higher education is regarded as a public service product financed and managed by the government, while the rise of neoliberalism has led to the gradual marketization of higher education, with the role of the government gradually diminishing, and the market principle beginning to play a role in higher education.

3. Challenges to higher education under neoliberalism

Neoliberalism emphasizes free competition in the market and individual choice, which has changed the way higher education operates to a certain extent, however, it has also brought a series of challenges.

The first is the shackles of marketization of higher education. Under the background of neoliberalism, higher education has begun to tilt towards commercialization, and the concept of value has undergone a fundamental shift, such as the economic logic replacing the logic of education and the corporate logic replacing the logic of the university, and higher education has gradually fallen into the abyss of marketization. In order to obtain more resources and funds, schools have to rely on corporate sponsorship, business cooperation and market-oriented operation. This has led to the commercialization tendency of universities in enrollment, teaching and research, and the pursuit of economic benefits to the neglect of the essence of education and social responsibility. The prevalence of meritocracy has reduced degrees from prestigious schools to a tool for those seeking to leapfrog up the class ladder, as well as a barrier for those at the top to prevent their own downward mobility. In economist A. Michael Spence's signaling model, productivity is negatively correlated with the cost of an individual's education, so that people with high ability have low education costs, and in turn will receive higher education, and companies can only indirectly judge an individual's labor ability through his or her education level. Academic qualifications seem to be the result of free competition in the diploma market, but it has also given rise to gray industries such as “certificate factories”, and the illegal trading of diplomas has become a shortcut for speculators to obtain higher education, which is the sadness of the modernization of higher education. Excessive commercialization tends to weaken the public nature and social value of higher education, further exacerbating the inequity of economic and social development.

Diploma inflation has created a surplus of labor in the job market. Under the influence of human capital theory and development economics, almost all countries have placed high expectations on the development of higher education, hoping that the establishment of “developmental universities” will improve national governance through the training of specialists and political elites in order to promote national development (Teichler, 2019). Although higher education provides equal opportunities for all people to join the competition of meritocracy and gives all people the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed in the new economy, in reality, with the globalization of higher education, higher education graduates have gone from scarcity to surplus, and structural unemployment has become more and more common, and the contradiction of the oversupply of talent in the market makes a large number of graduates face the problem of “unemployment upon graduation” every year. The contradiction of oversupply in the talent market makes a large number of graduates face the tragic situation of “unemployment upon graduation” every year. Based on Spence's “signaling theory”, after the expansion of higher education, if high ability individuals want to continue to send diploma

signals in order to be recognized in the labor market, they have to make further investment in education, and this investment is only for the purpose of achieving segregated equilibrium in the labor market, and will not increase individual's labor productivity. Therefore, the consequence of the expansion of colleges and universities is the devaluation of the diploma signal and over-investment in education, which is also an inefficient allocation of resources from an economic point of view.

4. The modernization of higher education

In the face of social transformation and the accelerating changes in the modern world, higher education must reform itself to ensure its sustainable development: free from the constraints of economic discourse, especially neoliberalism and market individualism, and guided by humanism, it should seek to strike a balance between instrumental rationality and value rationality on the premise of the pursuit of public values and the common good. Liberalism does not mean that the reform of higher education should be left entirely to market regulation; while reducing governmental authority and decentralizing power, it is necessary for the Government to adopt a certain degree of macro-control over higher education, in order to give full play to the autonomy and innovation of colleges and universities, and at the same time ensure that higher education operates in an orderly manner.

To build a social contract with equity as its cornerstone, and to maintain public interest and social responsibility while pursuing market efficiency. Educational equity is the objective requirement and inevitable reflection of the superiority of China's socialist system, and vigorously promoting educational equity is the sacred mission and responsibility of the times that higher education workers should shoulder. The government should allocate higher education resources fairly and equitably, macro-control micro-guidance rational layout, continuously improve management efficiency and resource utilization, optimize university research management and enhance research performance. Similarly for colleges and universities, promote management and governance reforms to ensure transparent and efficient institutional operations. Enhance decision-making and the rational allocation of resources, improve governance effectiveness, and better respond to challenges and achieve sustainable development.

Neoliberal market-oriented tendencies tend to cause educational institutions to pursue profit maximization at the expense of educational quality. Therefore, in terms of teaching quality, the Ministry of Education should solidly push forward the construction of the "double first-class", comprehensively improve the quality of teaching and the level of operation of colleges and universities, and high-quality promote the independent cultivation of top-notch innovative talents. On the basis of the construction of "double first-class", colleges and universities should further select and promote the "first-class discipline cultivation action", promote the construction of the "four new" disciplines and talent training, and promote the deep cross-fertilization between various disciplines. Deep cross-fertilization among disciplines. While pursuing national key strategic disciplines such as science and technology, we should also emphasize education in humanities and social sciences, and cultivate students' humanistic qualities, sense of social responsibility, and cross-cultural communication skills, which are crucial for adapting to the complex and changing job market and social environment. For higher education workers, education must enable students to re-examine the relationship between themselves and others, and between individuals and society, and to make it clear that the purpose of receiving education is not only to improve individual abilities, but also to promote social progress and the development of human endeavors. Higher education should not and must not be a "race to the top" screening process that allows a small number of people to

become a privileged or elite class, but rather should be the “glue” that holds society together(Wang, 2023).

With regard to employment, which is a major concern of society at large, the Government, in addition to providing more employment opportunities by accelerating economic development, can also link employment to enrolment, and push universities to make efforts to adjust their specialization and broaden employment channels. Colleges and universities need to establish a continuous and effective evaluation and quality assurance system to regularly assess teaching quality, student satisfaction and employment rates, and take the government's regular and institutionalized evaluation system as an opportunity to promote the sustainable and stable development of colleges and universities by taking the coordinated development of “scale, structure, quality, and efficiency” as the goal orientation. In addition, individual students should also improve their comprehensive abilities, including critical thinking, communication skills, cooperation spirit and innovation, in order to stand out in the highly competitive job market and adapt to different professional environments.

Today's era is a globalized knowledge-based economy, and we need to promote the building of a community of human destiny based on the concept of sustainable development and gradually eliminate the income gap between rich and poor countries. In this process, the role of education, especially higher education, is crucial - to cultivate globally minded citizens with open and inclusive attitudes who can jointly participate in building an interconnected, diverse and fast-changing world, realizing intra-generational and inter-generational equity, and solving common problems faced by humankind.

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