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Establishing World Class Universities in China: Deploying a Quasi-experimental Design to Evaluate the Net Effects of Project 985 (0385)

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Chinese authorities have released the names of 42 universities the country will support to achieve world-class status in 2017. An additional 95 HEIs were also selected to build their preponderant disciplines into first rate ones. This announcement, known as the 'Double First Class' initiative, formally replaces Project '211' and Project '985' and is supposedly a more inclusive and equitable project than its predecessors. Project 211 was initiated in 1995 by the Ministry of Education (MOE) aiming at raising the research standards of around 100 key universities for the 21st Century (Ministerial Office 2007). More than 17 billion RMB yuan (equivalent to £ 1.7 billion) has since then been spent on 118 universities but individual institutional impact remains insignificant due to the large number of higher education institutions (HEIs) supported (Cheng and Wang 2012). Project 985, launched in 1999, further shortlisted 39 universities from '211' institutions with a grand expectation from the MOE that limited resources could be concentrated on a batch of flagship universities that were best placed in China to realise world-class ambitions (Ngok and Guo 2008). The rapid advances of China's universities in major international league tables are perceived to have been achieved through Project 985. Despite normative commentaries of the long lived policy (e.g. Wang, 2011; Zhang, Patton, and Kenney, 2013; Shen, 2015), Project 985 has never been well studied, nor its contents rigorously researched.

National and provincial governments pump billions into '985' universities mainly based on the deeply embedded assumption that political will and abundant public funding will accelerate the establishment of WCUs. As Project 985 completed its second phase in 2007, the Ministry of Finance has been increasingly concerned about its funding efficiency, particularly since the National Institute of Education Sciences Report (2013) demonstrated that nearly half of the '985' universities had been identified as inefficient between 2007 and 2011 with high level inputs but low research outputs. Recent studies have also pointed out that Project 985 may not have the expected effectiveness due to the lack of competitive

mechanism and solidification of '985' identity (the State Council 2015). One striking gap throughout the lifetime of Project 985 is a lack of systematic evaluation as to the impact of the intervention on participating universities. This study addressed this gap by deploying a quasi-experimental design to explore the net effects of Project 985 on the publication outputs of 32 member universities between 1998 and 2013, using 27 '211' universities as a comparison group. We also intended to examine whether Project 985 has a more significant effect on the top listed nine universities, which have attracted more funding from the public and private sectors than the rest of the '985' universities. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent has Project 985 contributed to improved research outputs among participating universities?
2. Has Project 985 led to institutional differentiation among its member universities, and between '985' and '211' universities?

Significance of the research and contribution to knowledge

Project 985 as an initiative for creating WCUs plays a developmental as well as a political role in HE in China. Preferential allocation of resources to '985' universities has long been seen by the central government as critical to promoting research capacity and the quality of elite HEIs. The study results extend the public recognition of the significantly positive effects of Project 985: '985' universities as a whole have experienced a significant increase in academic publications. Thus, this finding adds to a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the Project 985 effect. It differs from previous studies in terms of the extended coverage of dataset and the quasi-experimental design. Most notably, this large scale evaluation involves sophisticated statistical models and rigorous analysis.

Project 985, together with restructuring in higher education, has contributed to China's vision of building WCUs, but the improvements hide significant disparities: our results also suggest the vertical differentiation between '985' and '211' universities has been noticeably enlarged. While '985' universities on average have made significant achievements, '211' universities and many more that exist outside of 'excellence' schemes would be demotivated to compete for quality improvement, which will potentially yield an unbalanced HE system

(Altbach 2016). Therefore, the overall quality improvement of the HE sector has been outweighed by the political imperatives of developing WCUs.

The impact of Project 985 on participating institutions' research performance is more complex than policy-makers and the public seem to believe. Our study also identified 'solid micro evidence' (Bolton 2014) that Project 985 has not had the desired effect on Tier 1 universities. A long-term tendency of publication saturation was observed in those nine Tier 1 '985' universities, despite generous investment by the government. This may have been the result of premature academic 'burn out'. Beneficial effects have largely been restricted to Tier 2 '985' institutions. We argue that the initial differences between both tiers of Project 985 would diminish and homogenizing tendencies would gather force over time.

The development pathways of Tier 1 institutions enable good predictions of the trajectories Tier 2 universities will follow later. Capacity constraints at Tier 1 '985' universities make us wonder whether Tier 2 '985' universities will withstand the pressure to continuously improve their research performance and the overall quality of higher education. This, together with the negative effect of R&D expenditure on ISI publications, makes it imperative to provide a mature recognition that a continued relentless focus on funding is necessary but not sufficient. The study findings also inform policy makers and HE leaders that greater sectoral and institutional reforms will inevitably fulfil individual HEI needs and remove bottlenecks to publication. The emphasis, therefore, should be placed on fluidity in the membership of WCUs, transparent selection and evaluation process (Wang 2004; Zhou, Thijs and Glanzel 2009). This emphasis also encourages an efficient flow and use of public funds, an optimal research culture, academic freedom and a conducive external environment (Altbach 2009; Cheng and Wang 2012; Yang 2016).

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