China ascends global higher education ranking

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A newly released global study quality index reveals that while the United States continues to lead globally in higher education, China is rapidly narrowing the gap, especially beyond the top tier of elite institutions.

The index, which was released on Thursday by Renmin University of China, provides a comprehensive analysis of academic strengths across nations and regions. It is based on a three-tier framework analyzing disciplines, universities and overseas study destinations.

It evaluates 42 key academic fields — 13 in humanities and social sciences and 29 in science, engineering, agriculture and medicine. Institutions are graded on a scale from A+ to C based on percentile rankings, focusing on academic innovation (50 percent), talent cultivation (30 percent), and international reputation (20 percent).

Findings confirm the United States' sustained dominance, with US universities accounting for 35 percent of the top 100 institutions in the comprehensive ranking. In discipline-specific ratings, the US holds a strong lead in both the humanities and the science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, fields.

However, Chinese universities are demonstrating remarkable progress and greater breadth of quality. The competitive distance between the two nations shrinks as the ranking scope widens. While Chinese institutions constitute 14 percent of the top 100 — with 11 from the Chinese mainland — this share grows to 15 percent of the top 300 and 17 percent of the top 500. The Chinese mainland accounts for the vast majority of the ranked Chinese institutions.

A detailed look at disciplines shows that China's STEM sector exhibits "broad quality but fewer pinnacles", with strong international competitiveness in areas such as materials science, electronic engineering, chemistry and computer science. In humanities and social sciences, apart from economics, a performance gap with the US remains. Researchers noted that this is partly due to structural factors such as global disciplinary discourse patterns and the prevailing English-language academic publication system.

Based on the aggregation of top-tier academic resources, the index generates a list of recommended study destinations. The top 10 countries and regions are the US, China, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Japan and Spain.

"The index identifies a global top 500, but we are deliberately not publishing a specific 1-to-500 ordinal ranking," said Zhou Guangli, executive director of the Evaluation Research Center at Renmin University of China. The intention is to highlight that all institutions making this list represent quality choices for prospective international students, moving beyond a simplistic and often stressful ranking mentality, he said.

With China being the world's largest source of international students, having a scientific and credible benchmark for overseas education quality is crucial. This matters in terms of national interests, the development of education services, and, most important, the welfare of students and their families, he said.

"Existing global university rankings often have a strong bias toward research output and overall reputation, which naturally favor STEM-focused institutions,"Zhou added. There has been a significant lack of an evaluation system that adequately accounts for disciplinary differences on a global scale, he said. "The index, building on our previous work, seeks to fill this gap."

Qu Zhenyuan, former president of the China Association of Higher Education, highlighted the importance of comparing universities based on their academic disciplines. He noted that different universities have distinct disciplinary focuses and strengths. For example, Renmin University of China and Tsinghua University differ significantly in their academic characteristics. This discipline-oriented comparison approach was recognized as methodologically meaningful for the objective evaluation of universities, he said.

Wang Zhanjun, director of the center for graduate education at the Beijing Institute of Technology, proposed adding an "international education environment" dimension, considering factors such as international relations and unexpected events influencing students' study destination choices.

Chen Zhiwen, editor-in-chief of online education portal EOL, said that there has been a continuous decline in the number of Chinese students studying in Western developed nations over the past five years.

Meanwhile, studying in countries and regions involved in the Belt and Road Initiative has gained popularity, driven by practical factors such as industrial relocation. For example, some families now choose study destinations like Thailand or Malaysia to align with their business layout, he said, adding that such dynamic, context-specific factors should be considered in the index in order to better reflect the evolving landscape of international education.

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