

# Higher Education Research Institutes in China

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## Introduction

Initially emerged in 1978, higher education research institutes (HERIs) in Mainland China have undergone rapid expansion in the past four decades. The trajectory of HERIs' development is closely aligned with the broader higher education sector as well as research development in China. Currently, these research institutes exist in various forms and sizes, and play multiple roles in Chinese higher education. Within the ever-changing higher education landscape, HERIs confronts various opportunities and challenges. Based on the existing literature, this article aims to provide an overview of HERIs in China and focuses its analysis on the roles and challenges facing these research institutes. Through Shanghai Jiao Tong University's case study, this article offers implications and recommendations for the future development of Chinese HERIs.

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## Overview of HERI in China<sup>1</sup>

### *A brief history of HERIs in China*

Higher education research did not emerge as a field of research or a discipline of study in Mainland China until 1978 when the education system was restored after the Cultural Revolution. In spite of its relatively short history, the study of higher education in China has experienced vibrant growth as the country's higher education system has been undergoing rapid transformation. While in western countries higher education is considered as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry rather than a separate scientific discipline (Altbach, 2009), it has been fortified as an independent academic discipline in China due to its unique context of education reform and socio-economic demands (Pan & Liu, 2006). It is argued, while the advancement of higher education research is the basis for HERIs' sustainable development, HERIs meantime provides support and resources for further development of higher education research (Liu, 2017). In other words, the phases of higher education research development in China can also reflect the trajectory of HERIs (Liu, 2015). Scholars tend to divide the discipline's past 40-year history into three phases: the early years, expansion and diversification stages (Pan & Li, 2009).

#### The early years (1978-1984)

The country's very first HERI, the Division of Higher Education Science was established by Prof. Pan Maoyuan at Xiamen University in 1978. It also marks the founding of higher education studies as a specialized field of research in China.

When China was set on an economic-oriented path to modernization in the late 1970s, the education system was recreated and university entrance examinations were reintroduced (Yang, 2004), which in turn led to the revival of China's higher education sector. A few academics published important works to urge and advocate the development of higher education research (including Prof. Pan's work on "Imperative to develop research on higher education theory" and "The development of higher education theory"). After its establishment, the Division of Higher Education Science at Xiamen University recruited its first postgraduate student in 1981 and was authorized by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to provide the first master's program in higher education in 1984 and then

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<sup>1</sup> The first two sections of this paper are based on and updated from the authors' previous publication: Wang, Q., & Liu, N.C. (2014). Higher education research institutes in Chinese universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(8), 1488-1498.

the first doctoral program in 1986. Following Xiamen University, a few other universities, including Peking University, Tsinghua University and East China Normal University, also founded research institutes of higher education. In 1983, China Association of Higher Education (CAHE) was founded, which formed an academic community of higher education researchers and has guided higher education research in China ever since (Pan, 1998). By then, there were about 20 HERIs in China. Different names were adopted, such as “Institute”, “Section” and “Department”. Researchers in these institutes were mainly academics and administrators from various disciplines and fields within the university, with rich experience in administration and management. These HERIs focused on conducting applied research and serving the needs for their universities’ strategic development, while some also stressed their work on academic research.

#### Expansion (1985-1998)

In 1985, the central government issued the policy document titled “Decision of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on Education System Reform”. The Decision intended to modify the goals, structures, and management of China’s higher education system. Along with the country’s unprecedented socio-economic reform, the Chinese higher education system experienced a series of transformation and restructuring, including increased student enrolments, the introduction of tuition fees, university students’ employability and employment issues, institutional mergers, marketization and privatization. These timely changes enhanced the development of higher education studies and resulted in a period of rapid expansion (Li, 2008).

By the 1990s, the number of HERIs reached more than 800, employing more than 3000 full-time researchers (Pan & Li, 2009). A number of graduate programs were set up to train and develop professional researchers and academics in the field of higher education. By 1998, there were four officially approved doctoral programs (Xiamen University, Peking University, East China Normal University, and Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan) and 23 officially approved master’s programs. In addition to academic teaching and research, HERIs were also actively involved in institutional research. Researchers in these institutes were increasingly professionally trained, and the number of researchers holding master’s and doctoral degrees was continuously growing, which in turn enhanced the institutes’ teaching and research quality (Liu, 2017). Instead of hiring from other departments with the universities on a part-time base, the number of full-time researchers working at these institutes was also increased.

### Diversification (1999-present)

The “Action Scheme for Invigorating Education towards the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, issued by the Ministry of Education in 1999, guided Chinese higher education’s take-off to an unprecedented expansion. The country’s socio-economic development has created a robust demand for highly educated knowledge workers at a national level and has inspired education ambitions of millions of Chinese at an individual level (Li, Morgan & Ding, 2008). The transformation from an elite to a mass system has brought substantial and complex changes in policies, rules and regulations governing Chinese higher education (Levin & Xu, 2006). Both existing and emerging issues need to be tackled. This has created another opportunity to develop higher education studies and HERIs in China (Yang, 2007).

In 2004, the Ministry of Education issued a policy statement titled “Suggestions on Further Strengthening the Development of Higher Education Research Institutes”, the very first recommendations on further development of HERIs from the government perspective (Pan & Li, 2009; Liu, 2017). The statement pointed out that in the previous 20 years, these research institutes had played an essential role in promoting higher education reform in China, including providing consultation services to the government in making higher education policies and strategies, engaging in basic and applied research, developing higher education disciplines, and training professional researchers in this field (Ministry of Education, 2004). However, it also identified challenges and concerns facing HERIs, e.g., gaps between theories and practices, lack of financial support, underutilization of research staff and lack of communication and collaboration among institutes (*ibid*). This policy statement has played a critical role to boost the HERIs’ development since then. Currently, the majority universities and colleges in China have HERIs, and the total number of HERIs in China is estimated to be well over 1000 (Zhai, 2015). HERIs have become more diversified in terms of organizations, affiliation and roles.

### ***Categories and affiliation***

HERIs are commonly divided into two types of organization models: HERIs as academic departments and those affiliated with university administrative offices (Liang & Li, 2004; Yang, 2007).

HERIs that are academic departments within universities focus on teaching, research, as well as social services. These research institutes can be 1) affiliated to schools or departments of education, such as the Research Center of Higher Education Development at the Institute of Education at Xiamen University and the

Department of Higher Education at the Graduate School of Education at Peking University; and 2) an independent school, academic or research unit under direct management of the university, such as the Institute of Higher Education at Fudan University. These institutes provide graduate programs in higher education and relevant subject areas and conduct both basic and applied research in this field (Yang, 2007). They provide academic support as well as consultation services for higher education development both at a national and local level. With high quality research output, these institutes have great influence both within the university and in the field of higher education in general. Some of these research institutes have been recognized by the government and are granted “Key Discipline” at the national level or awarded “Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Science” and “Strategic Research Base” status by MOE, serving as a “Think Tanks” to the government.

Another category of HERIs is those affiliated to administrative departments, such as the Academic Affairs Division, Research Management Division, or the President’s Office. These HERIs are committed to institutional research to support university strategic planning and decision making through a variety of research projects, statistical information gathering, and analytic activities, in addition to teaching and learning evaluation and development. In recent years, Offices of Strategic Planning and Development, equivalent to institutional research offices in the US, have been established in Chinese universities, particularly in those universities in pursuit of education and research excellence.

CAHE has organized review processes to recognize so-called “National Excellent Higher Education Institutes” averagely every three years, since 2005. Among the 200 selected excellent institutes in 2017, around 40% can be categorized into the academic departments, and 60% can be considered as affiliated to administrative departments and conducting largely applied oriented research (Li et al., 2018).

### ***Funding sources***

HERIs’ funding mainly comes from two resources, that is, regular funding for staff salary and research income. Regular funding for staff salary is provided by the university, based on the number of staff in the institute; while research income is largely supported by government agencies and the industrial sectors. In addition to those two major regular funding sources for almost every HERI, other possible funding sources include administrative and operating budget from universities, funding from special initiatives, such as the 985 Project and the 211 Project, tuition

income from professional education and training, donation for both infrastructure and projects, etc. For a small number of leading research institutes, it could be estimated that financial support from universities for staff salaries accounts for about one third of their overall budget; research income from various sources also accounts for about one third of their overall budget; and all the rest of the revenue sources make up about one third of their overall budget. Nevertheless, non-regular revenue sources vary dramatically from institute to institute and year by year. It is also worth mentioning that many HERIs suffer from financial support shortages.

## **Roles of HERIs**

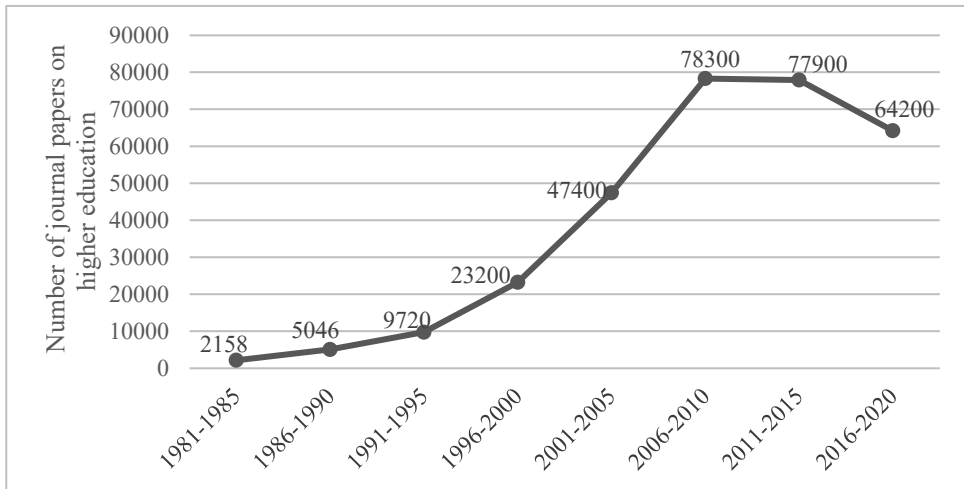
In spite of the diversified development, HERIs usually play five essential roles in the Chinese context: developing higher education research, providing teaching and learning programs in higher education field, conducting institutional research, offering consultation service to the government and society, as well as managing teaching and learning quality at HEIs (Zhao et al., 2011; Wang & Jin, 2012).

### ***Developing higher education research***

One of the essential roles of HERIs is to develop scientific research, both basic research on theories in higher education and applied research on practical issues and problems. A survey of the literature shows that higher education research in China can be summarized into three aspects. At the macro-level, research investigates fundamental issues, such as the nature of the university and its relevant ideologies and concepts, the relationship of academe to government in the context of knowledge economy, and philosophical debate on methodologies. At the meso-level, scholars intend to apply relevant theories to address systemic issues and challenges facing Chinese higher education. Micro-level research intends to provide solutions to day-to-day problems faced by academic institutions, including curriculum design, teaching and learning methods. (Wang & Jin, 2012)

With its further development in the past ten years, higher education research closely follows the policy trends and strategic development in the Chinese context. Heated research topics include developing academic excellence, engineering education, university governance, faculty and student development, educational innovation, as well as use of technology (particularly AI and big data) in higher learning (Jiang, 2019; Yang et al., 2021). Meantime, research output has flourished in the past forty years. Using “higher education” as keyword to search on CNKI

database, it shows the number of journal papers published in Chinese is well over 10,000 annually in recent years.



Source: Compiled with data from CNKI

**Figure 1. Number of journal papers on higher education published in Chinese over a five-year period in the past four decades**

### *Offering graduate programs in higher education field*

To provide teaching and learning programs in higher education and related fields is another central element. HERIs offer professional training to graduates who are likely to be both scholars and administrators in postsecondary education. The latest number available shows that, in 2015, 102 institutes among these HERIs provided master's programs, and 35 provided doctoral programs (Zhai, 2015). It is estimated that the current number of the master's and doctoral programs are well more than 100 and 30 respectively. One might argue that the percentage of HERIs offering graduate programs is rather low and estimated to be around 10%. The majority of degree programs are offered by HERIs at leading universities.

### *Conducting institutional research*

Another essential task of HERIs is institutional research, i.e., research taking place within an individual university, school or department, intends to inform campus decision-making and planning in a wide range of topics, including

accreditation, teaching and learning quality, admission and enrollment management, financial support, human resource, student life, etc. HERIs are accountable to provide such services (Liu, 2008), and are mandated to understand and be responsive to the issues and problems facing the university and to direct the institution's line of development and policies (Donald, 1996). These research institutes also serve as a clearinghouse for most statistical information about the university. Institutional research is increasingly becoming one of the essential roles of HERIs in the past 20 years.

### ***Providing consultation services for policy development***

HERIs have increasingly served as “Think Tanks” to higher education stakeholders to promote reform and innovation. This engagement takes place at the institutional, local and central government levels in China. In addition to the role of policy adviser within their own institutions, a few leading HERIs, including those awarded “Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Science” and “Strategic Research Base” status by the Ministry of Education, have been invited to participate in the development of government policy and strategic national-level research projects. However, scholars argue that the consultation and service roles played by HERIs are still quite limited (Zhao, 1998; Wang & Zhang, 2009; Pan, 2012). This will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Managing teaching and learning quality***

HERIs in China also contribute to teaching and learning development on their own campuses (Zhao et al., 2011). These institutes work with academics and students to develop effective teaching and learning strategies, to provide professional support and resources, and to encourage innovative curriculum design and teaching approaches. They aim to enhance education quality at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and ultimately to meet the strategic aims of the university in terms of teaching and learning.

Due to their own positioning, different HERIs have different focuses regarding these six roles and functions (Wu, 2008). Another survey shows that differences exist among HERIs at different levels of universities, namely universities selected by the 985 Project and the 211 Project and other regular higher education institutions. HERIs at the 985 and 211 Project universities tend to focus on developing higher education research as well as providing teaching and learning programs in higher education studies; research institutes at local higher education



institutions focus on institutional research.

## **Challenges to HERIs**

With the rapid growth in the last four decades, HERIs have served an increasingly important role in policy making for governments and university administrations, have produced a great deal of publications, and have educated a large group of higher education professionals. However, HERIs face several challenges which might limit their future development and scope of influence. These challenges also reflect the issues and problems higher education research confronts in China.

### ***Low recognition and imbalanced development***

The field of higher education and its research suffers from a lack of recognition in academe and a shortage of research funding and financial support (Tang & Ye, 2006; Yang, 2007; Liu, 2008). Many university administrators lack of understanding of the roles HERIs and its research can play in university development, and are apprehensive of engaging HERIs in basic and applied research (Zhao et al., 2011). Differing interpretations of HERIs' work by administrators results in contradictions in their positioning and confusion of the institutes' missions and responsibilities, all of which directly led to low performance of these institutes (Yang, 2007; Fan & Huo, 2011; Jiang, 2012).

Low recognition in the academe further leads to a shortage of financial support and research funding to these HERIs. Some universities do not allocate funding specifically for research; instead, many research institutes, especially those at universities administered by provincial or municipal governments, must create research budgets from funds allotted for regular educational purposes, including faculty salaries and other administrative overhead. These higher education institutes are left on their own to seek funding from other sources. Though some research institutes manage to obtain partial funding from national or provincial projects, lack of necessary research support may restrain research development (Tang & Ye, 2006).

This has led to imbalanced development among HERIs within the Chinese context. In terms of university levels, the leading research universities tend to have long-established HERIs, with stronger capacity to conduct both theoretical and applied research, to offer graduate programs in higher education, and to serve as "Think Tanks" for the government (Li et al., 2018). In terms of regions,

universities in the east and middle of China with relatively advanced socio-economic progress are generally more developed in terms of higher education research and institutes, compared to those in the western region (Zhao et al., 2011; Jiang, 2012).

The imbalanced development, along with the recent higher education policy change, has put some HERIs at risk. The recent policy initiatives, such as promoting world-class universities and disciplines (Double World-Class Project), has pushed some universities to focus on strong disciplines while re-considering, if not eliminating, other disciplines at disadvantage. Some HERIs which lack of clear strategic plans and suffer from university administration's low recognition have thus become the target.

### ***Low research quality and gaps between theories and practices***

Despite engaging in important research development over the last four decades and contributing a large number of publications to the field, HERIs suffer from criticism of low quality of research (Shi & Wen, 2009; Wu, 2020; Yu & Du, 2022) and in turn recommendations and contributions from these research are not fully adopted or applied to practice by governments and university administrations (Yang, 2007; Wang & Zhang, 2009). The underlying issues include narrow research focus, divorce from reality, as well as lack of quality research professionals (Ministry of Education, 2004; Wu, 2008; Shi & Wen, 2009).

In recent years, increasing research have focuses on topics closely related to practical problems and challenges facing Chinese higher education; however, lack of explanatory power and in-depth theoretical analysis is considered as the main reason undermining research quality (Pan & Li, 2009; Wu, 2020). Meantime, research funding tends to favour practical over theoretical research, which in turn slows down the development of the latter. Further, some theoretical research offers little implications for higher education practices, or implications offered are diverted from the actual Chinese context, and thus are lack of practical value (Yu & Du, 2022). If HERIs expect to increase their institutional, local, national and international impacts, great efforts are needed to improve their quality of research.

### **Experiences of Shanghai Jiao Tong University**

Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) is one of the first universities to establish HERI back in the 1980s. Its almost 40-year history and transformation might offer some implications for HERIs in China.

### ***Development trajectory***

SJTU first established its HERI – the Office of Policy Studies – in 1985, as part of the university administration. In the next 14 years, this Office served to conduct institutional research and provide policy consultation to the university. During this period, only a few staff worked at the unit and not all of them held relevant doctoral degrees. Directly related to its service role, the research focus at this period was mainly empirical studies using quantitative methodologies. This research unit started to deliver master's programs in higher education administration in 1999.

From 2000 to 2007, the research unit was merged and affiliated to the Office of Strategic Planning at SJTU. The number of researchers and staff increased to about a dozen, with majority holding doctoral degrees. Aligned with SJTU's then developmental goals to improve its competitiveness at both national and international level, the Office of Strategic Planning integrated accountability, evaluation, and institutional research to outline the university strategic direction and implemented benchmark exercises to compare SJTU's performance with its domestic and international counterparts. Meanwhile, the research unit also served as a policy consultant to MOE and published the first global university ranking, raising its visibility both domestically and internationally. In terms of delivering education programs, the Office started its first doctoral program in 2003.

In 2008, the research unit was separated from the Office of Strategic Planning and upgraded to the Graduate School of Education (GSE), as an academic unit directly under SJTU's management. This took place in the context that SJTU endeavoured to develop world-class social science disciplines and higher education research. GSE had clear visions and divided the school into three centers, which focus their research on academic excellence, graduate education, and science and technology policy respectively. By then, GSE recruited more than a dozen faculty members, with majority holding doctoral degrees from leading universities abroad. The number of enrolled graduate students is around 50-60 each year.

In addition to its traditional roles of institutional research, delivering education programs and policy consultation, GSE extended its internationalization activities to reinforce both its capacity and visibility in the global higher education research field. These activities included collaborating closely with its international counterparts, creating an international advisory board to guide and support its developmental goals.

In 2020, as the School of Education (SOE) was established, GSE became part of the SOE. To restructure the school, the previous three centers are now organized into two centers, focusing on world-class universities and graduate education. Following its previous research development, GSE currently focuses on enhance research impact at both national and international levels.

### ***Implications for HERIs in China***

HERIs have a relatively short history in China compared to those in other countries. Nonetheless they have become a major force in higher education reform. The development of this vibrant academic community has contributed to form the field of higher education research in China (Chen & Hu, 2012; Liu, 2017). Based on the above analysis on HERIs' roles and challenges in the Chinese context, the trajectory of GSE at SJTU might offer some implications for HERIs' future development.

First, it is important for governments and university administrations to understand the special roles of these research institutes, while HERIs themselves should have clear goals and strategies for development. HERIs are essential, as they undertake scientific research, both basic and applied, directly linked to higher education reform and development. Second, if HERIs expect to continue their local, national and international impacts, great effort is needed to improve research quality. The current intense socio-economic growth and rapid educational development can only be supported by high-quality research. Also, internationalizing HERIs' research and teaching will enable them to further improve their performance and thus raise their international visibility. Fourth, it is important for HERIs to increase their research impact, which in turn will boost their visibility, and help universities and their administration to recognize their values. Last but not least, to tackle issues of limited funding, HERIs should attempt to expand or diversify funding sources through quality services, including providing policy consultation and education and training programs.

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## Higher Education Research Institutes in China



### Higher Education Research Institutes (HERIs) in China

- **Overview of HERIs in China (mainland)**
- **Roles and challenges of HERIs in China**
- **Experiences of and suggestions from SJTU**



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## History of HERIs



- The first HERI in China was founded in 1978 at Xiamen University by Professor Pan.
- HERIs in China have undergone rapid expansion over the past 40+ years.
- The rapid growth is closely related to the broader higher education sector as well as research development in China.



## Categories of HERIs



- **HERIs as academic departments:** This kind of HERIs may be affiliated to schools or departments of education, or they can be independent schools of their universities.
- **HERIs affiliated with administrative offices:** This kind of HERIs are usually affiliated to Academic Affairs Division, Research Management Division, Office of the President, and more recently Office of Planning.
- Among the “Excellent HERIs” recognized by the China Association of Higher Education, about 1/3 are HERIs as academic departments.



## Number and size of HERIs



- The majority of universities and colleges in China have HERIs, and the total number of HERIs in China is estimated to be well over 1000.
- The number of full-time researchers at HERIs is small, and the number of full-time researchers holding doctoral degrees in relevant fields is even smaller.
- Leading HERIs typically have at least 10 faculty members, who have doctoral degrees in higher education related fields.



## Funding sources for HERIs: Vary greatly



- Funding for staff salary from university.
- Operating budget from university.
- Research income from funding agencies and other stakeholders.
- Funding from special initiatives such as the 985 Project.
- Tuition income from professional education and training programs.
- Donations for infrastructure and projects.
- Many HERIs suffer from a shortage of financial support.



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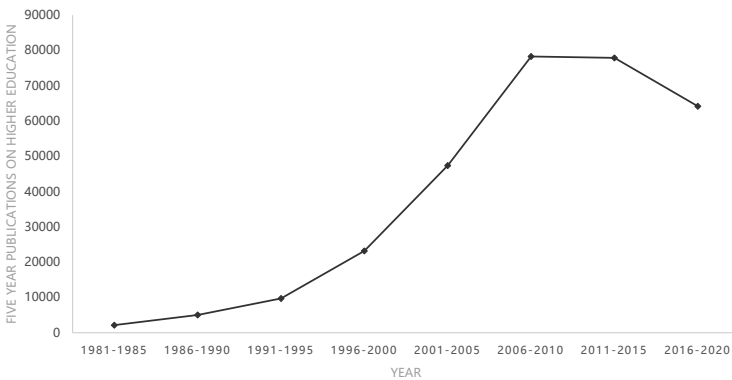
### Developing higher education research



- One of the essential roles of HERIs is to develop scientific research, both basic research on theories in higher education and applied research on practical issues and problems.
- HERIs at top research universities tend to focus on developing higher education research as well as providing teaching and learning programs.
- Research output has flourished in the past 40 years. According to CNKI database, the number of journal papers on “higher education” published in Chinese is well over 10,000 annually in recent years.



### Research output flourished in the past forty years



### Offering graduate programs in higher education



- The first Master's program in higher education was established in 1984 and the first doctoral program in 1986, both at Xiamen University.
- The current number of Master's programs is well over 100, while the current number of doctoral programs reaches more than 30.
- The percentage of HERIs offering graduate programs is rather low and estimated to be around 10%.
- The majority of doctoral programs are offered by HERIs in leading universities.



### Conducting institutional research



- Institutional research is becoming the essential role of more and more HERIs in the past 20 years.
- These HERIs provide information to support university decision-making and planning in a wide range of topics.
- These HERIs often serve as a clearing house for general statistical information about the university.



### **Providing consultation services**



- HERIs have increasingly served as ‘Think Tanks’ to higher education stakeholders.
- Consultation services for policy development may take place at the institutional, municipal, provincial and national government levels.
- Consultation services provided by HERIs are often criticized for the big gap between theory and practice.



### **Managing teaching and learning quality**



- These HERIs help their universities to develop effective teaching and learning strategies and to innovate curriculum design.
- They are often responsible for a variety of activities related to program and course evaluations.
- HERIs at local universities and colleges are more engaged in university management and administration work.



## Challenges to HERIs in China



- **Higher education research in China is often criticized for its low quality of research, low degree of internationalization, as well as the big gap between theory and practice.**
- **If HERIs expect to increase their institutional, local, national and international impacts, great efforts are needed to improve their quality of research and degree of internationalization.**



## Higher Education Research Institutes (HERIs) in China



- **Overview of HERIs in China**
- **Roles and challenges of HERIs in China**
- **Experiences of and suggestions from SJTU**

(Shanghai Jiao Tong University)



### 1985-1999: Quasi administrative unit of SJTU



- **Organization:** Part of the university administration.
- **Staff:** Only a few staff without doctoral degrees.
- **Service:** Institutional research and consultation services.
- **Research:** Directly related to service functions.
- **Education:** Master's program started in 1999.



### 2000-2007: Affiliated to an administrative unit of SJTU



- **Organization:** Affiliated to the Office of Strategic Planning.
- **Staff:** Increased to about a dozen, majority having doctoral degrees.
- **Service:** Institutional research and consultation services.
- **Research:** Improving quality by focusing on selected areas.
- **Education:** Doctoral program started in 2003.





### 2008-2020: Academic unit of SJTU



- **Organization:** Graduate School of Education.
- **Staff:** More than a dozen, majority having doctoral degrees abroad.
- **Research: Building brands by positioning globally.**
- **Education:** Average number of enrolled graduate students 50-60.
- **Service:** Consultation services for policy development.



### 2020-present: Part of School of Education of SJTU



- **Organization:** Two of the eight centers in the School of Education.
- **Staff:** More than a dozen, majority having doctoral degrees abroad.
- **Research: Enhancing impact by organizing major projects.**
- **Education:** Average number of enrolled graduate students 50-60.
- **Service:** Consultation services for policy development.



## Suggestions for HERIs in China



- Improving quality by focusing on selected areas
- Building brands by positioning globally
- Enhancing impact by organizing major projects
- Obtaining funding by providing quality services



Thank you very much!

