

# Insights from the German Classical University Concept and Harvard's Educational Philosophy for China's "Double First-Class" University Initiative

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**Abstract:** The topic of building world-class universities has been discussed and practiced in China for over a century, with evolving strategies guiding the development of higher education. The German classical university model and the educational philosophy of Harvard University have long been studied as benchmarks within the higher education community. These models have significant relevance to current higher education reforms, particularly China's "Double First-Class" initiative. This article examines the educational principles of both to understand their potential applications to the "Double First-Class" Initiative and broader reforms in Chinese higher education.

**Keywords:** German classical university Concept; Harvard University; Double First-Class; insights.

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## 1. Introduction and Background

Higher education has always been an open system, developing through international exchanges and mutual improvement. The modernization of Chinese higher education reflects a process of learning from others: adopting Japanese and German models during the late Qing reforms, studying the American system in the Republican era, drawing on the Soviet model after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and borrowing from Anglo-American approaches after the reform and opening period. This path, though indirect, has seen a general upward spiral of progress, and today China has the largest higher education system in the world. Building world-class universities has been a core goal since China began building modern universities, symbolizing a century-long dream for Chinese higher education.

With the launch of Project 985, the construction of world-class universities was formally incorporated into the national strategy. In August 2015, the government formally launched the "Double First-Class" initiative, which aims to create world-class universities and disciplines, consolidating previous national projects such as Project 211 and Project 985 under a more systematic and comprehensive approach. This initiative is being pursued alongside the vision of an "Education Powerhouse", which positions education as a strategic foundation for building a modern socialist state, with higher education playing an irreplaceable role in achieving this goal.

Germany is widely regarded as a pioneer in European higher education reform, providing a model that influenced later systems in the United States, Japan, and other countries. Scholars refer to this approach as the German classical university model, epitomized by figures such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Harvard University, an institution that predates the United States by more than a century, has become one of the world's most prestigious universities, with an influence that extends beyond national borders and serves as a reference point for universities worldwide. Both the German

classical model and the Harvard philosophy represent distinct educational models, each of which has been successful in cultivating talent and generating significant positive impacts in their societies, supporting high-quality economic and social development. In the current quest to build an educational powerhouse, both models offer essential insights for the development of Chinese higher education.

## 2. Key Concepts from the German and Harvard Models

The German classical university model and the Harvard philosophy have served as valuable models throughout the history of quality higher education, providing a blueprint for educational excellence. Here, the two models are examined through their perspectives on the purpose, functions, goals, and educational processes of a university.

### 2.1. Purpose of Higher Education

According to Humboldt, a university is a community of scholars that reflects the will of the state while remaining an autonomous academic institution. Fichte argued that universities should pursue rationality and the search for truth, serving as a path to God and religion and as a center of human progress. Schleiermacher saw the pursuit of knowledge and science as intrinsic to human nature, with universities playing a central role in the scientific community.

Harvard's motto, Veritas (Truth), underscores the university's commitment to truth, expressed in the school's ethos of "friendship with Plato, friendship with Aristotle, but above all, friendship with truth."

### 2.2. Functions of Higher Education

In the classical German model, higher education is primarily a place for exploring science, cultivating knowledge of the world, and improving personal character. Humboldt posited that the primary mission of a university is the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the cultivation of individuality and morality. Fichte emphasized that the primary task of the university is to produce scholars. Schleiermacher also underscored the importance of universities in fostering

understanding, where faculty and students explore and develop cognitive skills together.

At Harvard, administrators and official documents consistently prioritize teaching and research as the core responsibilities of the institution, with community service as a secondary concern. Former Harvard president James Bryant Conant emphasized that a university's focus should be on the pursuit of truth, while the application of that knowledge is not a primary concern.

### 2.3. Goals of Higher Education

Both the classical German model and the Harvard philosophy ultimately emphasize the development of cultured individuals. The German model seeks to cultivate "men of refinement" who embody knowledge, morality, and rational thought. Harvard's early mission was to educate well-rounded ministers, and it later evolved to promote the development of educated individuals who possess critical thinking and intellectual skills.

### 2.4. Educational Process

#### (1) Integration of General and Specialized Education

The German classical model emphasizes the pursuit of reason and philosophy, with specialized training as an essential component. Similarly, Harvard has developed a curricular structure that integrates core, specialized, and elective courses designed to produce well-rounded individuals with specialized skills. Both models advocate a foundation of broad education followed by specialization.

#### (2) Integration of Teaching and Research

Both the German classical model and Harvard emphasize the combination of teaching and research. In Germany, faculty are selected primarily for their research originality, on the assumption that only skilled researchers make good teachers. Humboldt saw scientific research and the cultivation of talent as intimately connected, and promoted the idea of "education through science. Harvard also values the research skills of its faculty, with a tenure system that encourages both research excellence and teaching quality. Henry Rosovsky, former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, emphasized that research and teaching are complementary, with research improving teaching standards.

#### (3) Fostering Independent Thinking and Self-Direction

Both models share a commitment to developing individuals who can think for themselves. The German classical model seeks to develop well-rounded individuals with reflective and analytical skills. In keeping with American values of individual autonomy, Harvard emphasizes the cultivation of independent thinking and self-directed learning.

#### (4) Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is considered fundamental to the existence and growth of a university. The classical German model regards academic freedom as a core principle, while Harvard's history has consistently defended academic freedom for students and faculty alike, ensuring that they can freely pursue knowledge.

#### (5) Diverse co-curricular activities

Despite its emphasis on solitude and intellectual rigor, the German model recognizes that personal development requires a diverse environment. Humboldt argued that a varied environment fosters growth, while a monotonous environment hinders it. Former Harvard President Derek Bok argued that higher education should promote the holistic development of students, making extracurricular activities an

integral part of the educational experience.

## 3. Implications for China's "Double First-Class" Initiative

These insights into "what higher education is, why it exists, and how it should function" provide valuable guidance for China's Double First-Class initiative. In the current climate of ranking-driven education, schools focus on rankings, administrators on career advancement, teachers on prestige, and students on graduation. The German and Harvard models encourage a more balanced approach, promoting the value of higher education institutions as places for the pursuit of science, truth, and deep knowledge, and emphasizing autonomous talent development and academic inquiry.

### 3.1. Pursuit of Academic Excellence

Academic excellence, not administrative rank, should be the measure of a world-class university. Universities should return to their academic roots, optimize standards, foster critical thinking and innovation, and encourage students and faculty alike to strive for scholarly achievement.

### 3.2. Foundations in Teaching and Research

China's higher education is charged with societal and family expectations to educate socialist builders and successors, promote social mobility, and serve as a buffer for social tensions. These goals require a focus on the fundamental tasks of teaching and research.

### 3.3. Cultivating Educated Individuals

The German and Harvard models both seek to cultivate well-rounded, cultured individuals. This means that universities should focus less on producing self-serving individuals and more on fostering scholarly excellence and intellectual growth.

### 3.4. Respect for Academic Freedom

Monroe emphasized that academic freedom is essential to societal progress because it supports innovation for human welfare. True academic freedom is a societal benefit, and China's education system should adopt an approach that supports free academic exploration while maintaining classroom standards.

### 3.5. Creating a Supportive Policy Environment

Building "Double First-Class" universities requires a supportive and tolerant policy environment. Universities should strive to achieve their goals while aligning with national objectives, with government guidance balancing oversight and autonomy.

These principles from the classic German model and Harvard's philosophy provide important lessons for improving the quality and global competitiveness of Chinese higher education through the Double First-Class initiative.

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