



ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL: President Lin Jianhua attends Zhejiang University's 2013 graduation ceremony on June 29

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administrator yet did not have impressive academic achievements.

Founded in 1897, Zhejiang University ranked 28th on the 2013 Asian University Rankings released by British higher education consulting company Quacquarelli Symonds in June. It is the sixth most prestigious among all higher learning institutions on the Chinese mainland. The university has more than 44,000 full-time students.

Wang Xiaojie, head of the French chapter of Zhejiang University's Alumni Association who contributed to the formation of the online statement, said that the students, teachers and alumni of the university should be able to have a say in who is appointed its president.

In his inauguration speech, Lin said that he will work hard to provide professors and students with the opportunity to realize their potential and compete fairly.

Stifling bureaucracy

In China, the presidency of a top-notch university is deemed as an official government post. Currently, presidents of 76 universities directly under the Ministry of Education (MOE) have administrative rankings corresponding to vice minister or bureau chief.

That administrators of the nation's top universities are officials first and educators second is a frequent criticism.

"They answer to the higher authorities that appoint them but not the faculty and students," said Xiong Bingqi, Deputy Director of Beijing-based education think tank 21st Century Education Research Institute, noting that bureaucracy in higher learning institutions across the country has hampered teaching quality.

"How its president is elected reflects the key values of a university, which should be the pursuit of higher academic levels, rather than bureaucratic abilities," said Yang Dongping, Director of the institute.

The appointment system shows that Chinese universities are not independent, Yang said, adding that the system needs reform and autonomy of universities is an important component of education reform.

According to Liu Daoyu, former President of Wuhan University in central China's Hubei Province, the current method for selecting university presidents seems to have taken a big step backwards compared to the system that was in use in the 1980s when the MOE

Breaking the Old System

Controversies over a university president's appointment arouses debate about higher education reform By Yin Pumin

On June 26, Lin Jianhua was appointed by national education authorities to take the helm of prestigious Zhejiang University in east China's Zhejiang Province. But the transfer brought the obscure former headmaster of Chongqing University nothing but embarrassment.

Just days before the announcement, Zhejiang University's alumni jointly posted a statement online expressing their requirements for a new president, as well as an open letter

directly opposing the rumored installation of Lin on the grounds.

"A university with a history of 116 years needs a president who has an excellent academic background in order to carry on its distinguished cultural legacy," the open letter wrote.

It said that Lin, who was provost and executive vice president of Peking University before becoming president of Chongqing University in October 2010, was a solid

would carry out opinion polls among senior academics before appointment. Now university headmasters are simply brought in from on high.

Wang explained, "Professors and students have no idea today who will be appointed head of the university tomorrow; if this were to happen in France it would be a joke."

Wang favors an approach in which the position is first advertised publicly and then a competitive screening of candidates is undertaken by a body formed by the university in collaboration with central authorities. He suggested that alumni should also be invited to take part in the process.

Chu Zhaohui, a researcher with the National Institute of Education Sciences, warned that "parachuted" presidents were very likely to fail due to a lack of knowledge about their schools.

"Especially after the merger of Chinese universities since the late 1990s, those presidents only with administrative experience will have many problems dealing with the whole management of the larger universities," Chu said.

In recent years, university presidents have rotated between positions more frequently, which makes it more difficult for them to appreciate the unique characteristics of each university, Xiong said.

Stalled reform

The power of bureaucrats in China's universities has been widely criticized since 2007, when Zhang Ming, a professor at the Beijing-based Renmin University of China, complained on the Internet how deans abuse their administrative power to influence academic research.

"Universities are run by bureaucrats as if they were government departments. They focus on quantity instead of quality," Zhang said.

In a blog he wrote in March 2007, Zhang said that he might be forced to leave the university after publicly defying the director of the school of international relations.

Two days later, Zhang was deposed as head of his department, although he kept his title at the university.

Other universities strive for relative autonomy. In Guangdong Province's Shenzhen, Zhu Qingshi bucked the trend as president of South University of Science and Technology, which issues degrees through accredited overseas schools independently of the MOE.

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When the MOE required universities to expand enrollment to absorb excess labor, Zhu pushed back to preserve the school's extraordinarily low student-to-teacher ratio.

According to the aims outlined in China's 10-year program for education reform in 2011-20, there are going to be changes to the way government manages higher education. The practice of ranking school officials according to the same system that applies to government officials will be done away with and the method of appointing school presidents will be improved.

In January, three presidents recruited through open selections by the MOE assumed the chairs of their universities. They are Zhang Xinxin of University of Science and Technology Beijing, Xu Anlong of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine and Lai Maode of Nanjing-based China Pharmaceutical University in east China's Jiangsu Province.

The three university presidents were picked last December. It was the second time the MOE has publicly recruited top leaders for its affiliated universities.

The previous round, which began in December 2011, included openings for two university presidents for Changchun-based Northeast Normal University in Jilin Province and Chengdu-based Southwestern University of Finance and Economics in Sichuan Province, as well as six university chief accountants. The whole process had multiple layers of screening that ended in March 2012.

During this round, the ministry adapted requirements for candidates that focused on two things: candidates must have rich experience in management of high-level universities, and they have to guarantee their complete immersion in university management once they are selected.

"A more open selection process will help address the problem that Chinese universities

are overly influenced by their administrations," said Lao Kaisheng, an education professor at Beijing Normal University.

"The new requirements reflect the MOE's purpose in recruiting truly professional presidents who are impervious to the influence of administrative power," Xiong said.

Zhang Zongyi, who became president of the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics after going through the MOE's recruitment process in 2011, said that the procedures were tough.

"When I applied for the president position, I did not expect it to be so difficult. I actually thought it would just be some interviews," Zhang said in an interview with *The Beijing News*.

When Zhang gave his campaign speech, he found that students and faculty, as well as some retired professors and alumni of the university, were present.

However, Xiong said that the recruitment process is not open enough.

"Although any candidates who meet the requirements can participate in the selection, members of the expert panel that decided the result are from the MOE rather than any independent college councils," he said.

According to the MOE, public opinions from representatives of faculty and students are also included in the recruitment. However, this does not help dissolve Xiong's disbelief. "Last year the feedback of faculty and students was not published and we don't know how big a role their opinions played in the final decision," Xiong said.

"No success will be achieved for education reform, as long as the presidents are appointed by administrative authorities," he added. ■