

UNIVERSITY WORLD NEWS: The global window on higher education.

GLOBAL: A new internationalisation era for Chinese

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24 July 2011

Issue: 181

The past decade has seen a major transformation of Chinese higher education. The country has reshaped its higher education sector from elite to mass education, with the number of graduates quadrupling to three million a year over six years. The number of Chinese students attending Western universities has also continued to grow steadily in the same period.

China is exceptional among lower-income countries in using tertiary education as a development strategy on such a scale, aiming to make higher education available to as many of its citizens as possible.

It happened coincidentally that the UK Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education was implemented with this expansion of China's higher education sector in the late 1990s. Since then there has been continuous growth in the number of international students from China to the UK and other Western countries; and such growth has been maintained even during the global economic recession and the slowing down of the growth of Chinese higher education in recent years.

According to the latest statistics from the Chinese government, a total of 284,700 Chinese students and scholars went to foreign universities or research institutes in 2010 - an increase of 55,000 or 20% compared with 2009.

But despite the impressive growth in numbers, there are serious qualitative issues facing international students from China.

It is commonly acknowledged, for instance, that most Chinese students lack basic knowledge and working experience about society. This has led them to take a very narrow view of university education, following their own interests and career objectives.

And the majority of Chinese students are not used to independent and critical thinking, which prevents them from gaining a comprehensive understanding of China's economic, social and political issues.

As far as course selection is concerned, Chinese students aim at a few 'hot' subjects such as engineering, business and banking. But this prevents them from developing multicultural communication and understanding.

Given the uneven income distribution and social discrimination within Chinese society, it would be valuable for Chinese students to have a proper understanding of the concepts of citizenship, civil society and social responsibility - crucial elements for social development in China in the new decade. This raises important questions for international higher education providers about the curricular needs of Chinese students in the context of China's economic, social and political transition.

Given the segregation of formal higher education from society in China, what can be done?

The key for Western universities is to enhance engagement with Chinese society via wide contacts and cooperation with relevant Chinese stakeholders. A fundamental and strategic adjustment is necessary for those institutions and academics that commit themselves as higher education providers to Chinese students in the coming decade.

Rather than focusing narrowly on knowledge transfer and methodological improvement, broad social knowledge, cross-cultural communication and the practice of engagement with society should be emphasised and enhanced.

Such a new strategy of engagement with Chinese society would require systematic change in a number of areas:

- * First, it would encourage more collaborative research with Chinese institutes and scholars to achieve better mutual understanding of the progress, challenges and needs facing China in the coming years.
- * Second, it would encourage the establishment of more jointly delivered courses for Chinese students before they go abroad, taught by teachers with experience in research and teaching in China.
- * Third, it would emphasise the importance for Chinese students of work and volunteering opportunities during the period of their studies abroad, to develop understanding, confidence, leadership and entrepreneurship capacity.
- * Finally, it would encourage - along with disciplinary knowledge and methodological training - access for Chinese students to modules with elements of global citizenship and multicultural communication skills.

From the perspective of engagement with China, the internationalisation of higher education in recent years can be summarised as having attracted large numbers of international students from China. China opened its doors to welcome foreign recruiters to develop their business, resulting in a global higher education market.

But the new decade will be one of challenges and uncertainties regarding continued growth in international Chinese student numbers. This is due to many factors, including increases in tuition fees and the growing controls over study and post-study visas in the UK and other countries. Also, it is increasingly difficult for students to find suitable jobs in China after graduation.

Instead of quantitative growth, we argue that a new strategy is necessary to enhance the quality of higher education provision, through collaboration with relevant stakeholders. The same would be true of other major source countries such as India. And if we are correct, the internationalisation of higher education in China has entered a new stage.

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