

# **CHINA'S EDUCATION SECTOR IN TRANSITION**

## **MOVING TOWARDS INSTITUTIONS OF APPLIED LEARNING**

*The following is a summary of an international seminar on “Local Universities in Transition: international experiences and local practice”, which was convened by the National Academy of Education Administration in Kunming, Yunnan, Southwest China, in November 2014.*

## **BACKGROUND**

Following decades of double-digit growth, China is now gradually moving towards a more sustainable mode of development. This transition has highlighted a shortage of skilled labour. In order to fill this gap, the national government is calling for higher education institutions to be brought in line with national development goals and establish closer relationships with industry. As part of this initiative the Ministry of Education announced in May 2014 that 600 universities would be turned into institutions of applied learning.

In response, the National Academy of Education Administration convened an international conference to discuss the reform and its impact on the education sector and affected local institutions. The conference was organised in partnership with the British Council and the University of Tampere in Finland, and hosted in Kunming by Yunnan Normal University. Delegations from both the UK and Finland took part in the conference, alongside an estimated 100 participants from China, consisting mostly of university leaders.

## **CHALLENGES FOR CHINA**

The conference revealed some resistance to the reform among institutions, many of which are unclear as to why they need to convert to universities of applied learning. There are widespread concerns about how institutions can adapt their management systems in the case of a recategorisation and how such a change of status will affect their reputation.

In order for recategorised institutions to fulfil their goals, education management systems and faculty structures will need to be adapted to reflect the new education philosophy. Institutions will need to adjust their admission requirements and procedures to reflect the new education goals. Provision, delivery and assessment of educational programmes and subjects will need to be brought in line with national development goals and employment needs, while governance systems will need to be made more accessible to allow for industry involvement in education. Qualifications will also need to be adjusted to reflect both academic and professional needs. Many institutions are reluctant to be recategorised due to these required changes.

It will also be necessary for affected institutions to improve the public image of institutions of applied learning and address the perception of the graduates they produce in order to avoid losing their former reputation. Many conference participants expressed their concern that students and their parents prefer low-ranking universities over high-ranking institutions of applied learning due to the widespread belief that knowledge is more valuable than practical skills. This is reinforced by the tendency of many employers to focus on rankings and academic achievement in their recruitment processes. As a result, many institutions are highly concerned about the reputational damage a recategorisation may cause.

## **CONFERENCE RECOMMENDATIONS**

Only 178 universities are participating in the transformation process so far, despite the financial incentives that have been put in place. Some conference participants believe the motivation for universities to be recategorised must be internal, while others believe only policy incentives can help in reaching the goal of turning 600 universities into institutions of applied learning.

The following are the recommendations the conference participants agreed on:

1. the importance of vocational education must be highlighted to change public and employer perceptions
2. the vocational education model must be further developed to improve the quality and employability of graduates
3. the involvement of NGOs in the vocational education sector must be encouraged
4. the management and faculty of converted institutions must be provided with overseas training
5. partnerships with overseas institutions and the recruitment of foreign students must be encouraged
6. research and teaching capacity must be increased
7. policy on the recruitment of industry professionals as teaching staff must be improved and include performance evaluations
8. the ratio of faculty with both academic and professional qualifications must be increased to more than 50 per cent
9. double-qualification programmes must be developed in cooperation with industry.

The above recommendations will inform the policy-making process and further decisions of the Ministry of Education in the transition period.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE UK**

As suggested by the participation of delegations from the UK and Finland, as well as some of the recommendations, there is a strong interest among Chinese education institutions and professionals in learning from international experience and engaging with suitable partners. Having gone through a transition of similar scope in 1992, and with more than 80 joint vocational education programmes with China already in place, the UK is in a strong position to respond to this interest.

There are potential opportunities for UK institutions to share their expertise on policy matters and approaches to vocational education, especially in relation to engagement with industry. However, as the reform is still in the early stages of being implemented, it is yet unclear how much of a commercial opportunity there is for the UK.