

# WORKSHOP ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN UK-CHINA TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION



PART OF  
UK-CHINA EDUCATION POLICY WEEK  
14-19 MARCH 2016

# SUMMARY REPORT

As part of the UK-China Education Policy Week, which took place in Beijing from 14 to 19 March 2016, this Workshop on Quality Assurance in UK-China Transnational Education brought together leaders from education institutions in the UK and China to discuss how to improve quality assurance for UK-China joint programmes and institutes, and agree on an action plan for 2016.

This report summarises the discussions and key findings of the event.

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As the concluding event of the UK-China Education Policy Week, this workshop marked an important milestone in the history of UK-China transnational education, coming at a time when more than 260 UK-China transnational education programmes are in operation in the country with approval from the Ministry of Education, allowing nearly 57,000 students to study towards a UK qualification in China, an increase of 36 per cent over 2012.

2016 also marks the opening of the first UK-based institution for a Chinese university: the Cardiff-Beijing Chinese Studies Joint College in Cardiff, between Beijing Normal University and Cardiff University.

As China continues to develop its economy and move up the value chain, the enhancement of standards and internationalisation of education provision is crucial for national prosperity. And with new, more stringent regulations introduced for current and future cross-border education partnerships in China, the UK needs to safeguard the quality and smooth running of transnational education relationships in order to remain China's preferred partner in cross-border education.

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*"Knowledge knows no borders. Joint programmes, laboratories, mutual recognition of credits and degrees – this is all creating a new landscape of university development."*

**Professor Chen Li**

Vice-President, Beijing Normal University

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## TNE Overview: China

Offering a government policy perspective, Mr Yan Bingchen, Director of the Division of Cross-Border Education Partnerships and Management at the Ministry of Education's Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges, delivered a thorough overview of China's current strategy for transnational education.

Mr Yan summarised recent transnational education metrics, showing that the UK is mostly engaged in China's central and coastal regions, and that the most popular subject areas undertaken in transnational education are engineering, computer science and manufacturing, closely followed by management courses, which, Mr Yan noted, have faced the imposition of stricter quotas recently, because management is not considered a priority subject area by the Ministry of Education.

Looking at the future landscape for transnational education development in China, Mr Yan stressed that the government will be guided by its overall ambition to "comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society", achieved via all-round improvements and innovation in education.

Mr Yan touched on the Ministry of Education's new, stricter approval procedures for transnational education, stating that the evaluation process will be published online for greater transparency. Another new development for 2016 is that joint research programmes will be decided by the Ministry of Education on a five-year cycle of review and assessment, starting from this year, with the result valid for a further five years.

## Quality Assurance Overview: UK

Dr Fabrizio Trifiro, Deputy Head of International at the Quality Assurance Agency, responded with an update on the activities and developments of the Quality Assurance Agency.

Transnational education is the main growth area of UK higher education, Dr Trifiro revealed, with over 80 per cent of UK universities engaged in some form of transnational education all over the world. The number of people studying for UK courses overseas now exceeds the number coming to the UK.

Delving into the working practices of the Quality Assurance Agency, Dr Trifiro described how his organisation is increasingly seeking to liaise with counterpart agencies in transnational education host countries, such as China, in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of monitoring.

The Quality Assurance Agency has conducted research on whether its reviewing approach to transnational education should be strengthened, and the findings showed that the organisation would benefit from strengthening cooperation with overseas partners to find ways to better coordinate quality assurance approaches and lessen the burden on the Quality Assurance Agency.

The QACHE (Quality Assurance of Cross-border Higher Education) Project, in operation from 2013 to 2015, was a European investigation that identified several issues, including a lack of information and knowledge of each other's quality assurance approaches; a trust gap between sending and receiving each other's quality assurance findings; and an overall low-level of cooperation in quality assurance of cross-border higher education.

Dr Trifiro explained that lack of information and trust meant that quality assurance was unable to facilitate the building of relationships across borders, leading to a vicious circle.

In order to rectify the situation and create a virtuous circle, it was suggested that information should be shared more readily to improve mutual trust, which in turn would lead to more co-operation, and, ultimately, both sides coming to recognise each other's quality assurance decisions. This would have the desired result of better safeguarding students against low-quality cross-border education, as well as unnecessary duplication of assessment and regulations.

Dr Fabrizio closed by sharing the early findings of a short study currently being undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency, looking at the challenges and obstacles of inter-agency cooperation. Trust-building was a major theme, which takes time and requires resources, the study found. Therefore long-term commitments and a strategic approach with partners are essential.

Another finding was the importance of engagement with key stakeholders, including the government, in order to facilitate preferential legislation while at the same time preventing legislation that would impede the work of cross-border quality assurance agencies.

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*“We should remind ourselves that enhancing cross-border cooperation between agencies is uncharted territory, so this workshop is important – we are being pioneers in this field today.”*

**Dr Fabrizio Trifiro**

Deputy Head of International, Quality Assurance Agency

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## A Partnership of Equals

Transnational education in China must move on from the traditional notion that students in one country are taught by a university from another country. Now it is based on the shared notion of equal contributions from both partners, but having this kind of partnership system does lead to certain trade-offs, suggested Professor Nigel Healey, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Nottingham Trent University.

For example, the partnership might come under pressure to localise and adopt a more Chinese curriculum, according to the requirements of the Ministry of Education. And with local staff delivering courses, the culture of these institutions might drift further still from its UK origins.

In this way, there are limits to local adaption, explained Professor Healey, and to what extent that occurs depends on the interest of the stakeholders, including the government, students, the joint venture partner, and the home institution.

Professor Christopher Carmen, Academic Director of the University of Glasgow-Nankai Joint Graduate School, exemplifies a new approach to this ‘partnership of equals’, by being based permanently in China. At his institution, half the course is delivered by teachers from Nankai and half by teachers from Glasgow, with all lessons taking place on the Nankai campus.

Under the system of equal partnership, China is able to benefit from transnational education as a learning process, explained Professor Xi Youmin, Executive President of Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. But he acknowledged that skills and best practice learned should be more widely shared with other universities in China that aren’t engaged in transnational education. Professor Xi said that this is an important area his institution is addressing via a range training programmes for academic administrators.

## Quality Before Profit

Professor Zhao Yanzhi, Dean of the Surrey International Institute at Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, said that his institution’s top ten ranking

was down to a culture of putting quality assurance before profitability in their international cooperation.

Beyond teaching standards and the student experience, this also extends to operating within a democratic management environment, rather than just the dean or another senior figure setting the agenda. Furthermore, Professor Zhao explained how his institution has implemented a policy of student recruitment that targets the best students from a mix of different cultural backgrounds.

Professor Healey, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Nottingham Trent University, conceded that Nottingham Trent University historically got involved in transnational education for commercial reasons, but today their engagement in China is based on an ambition to give all students cross-cultural exposure and an international mind-set through meaningful international partnerships.

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*“We expect our students to go to China, undertake internships, field trips, and summer schools, and take back all that richness to the UK to develop those ideas – a two-way flow of benefits to the students of both institutions.”*

**Professor Nigel Healey**  
Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Nottingham Trent University

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The importance of focusing on quality before profitability was exemplified in the new, stricter regulations for the approval of transnational education partnerships, with one delegate explaining that the Ministry of Education is determined to avoid a situation where overseas universities are opening “chain stores” in China primarily to make money.

## Two Systems, One Partnership

Professor Xi Youmin, Executive President of Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, said that according to his institution’s experience, the big challenge in cross-border education comes from having two systems with different philosophies of education and ideas, and different systems to assess performance.

In the UK, external examinations are a mandatory quality assurance mechanism, but China’s own approach to examinations is “the most challenging aspect when it comes to reaching a shared understanding of each other’s essential red line requirements”, explained Professor Carmen, Academic Director of the University of Glasgow-Nankai Joint Graduate School.

Conversely, it was pointed out that the Chinese credit system is more flexible than the UK’s system. For example, if students were to fail their second year of study in China they might be able to make up the difference in the third year, but in the UK they would instead be required to retake their second year.

Other steps put forward in the workshop to ensure more harmonious provision of transnational education under two systems included the suggestion that both the Chinese and the English language should be considered equal when it comes to contracts, and a call for leadership rotation so that representatives from overseas institutions are able to take senior positions in the overall governance of institutions.

## Greater Transparency

While the Ministry of Education is clear that overseas universities can set up joint programmes in China, there is a limit on the number of partners they can engage with in order to ensure quality and good management. But the precise quotas, requirements and regulations of the assessment process were the subject of much discussion, with the general consensus from the UK side that greater transparency is needed.

Dr Lin Mengquan, Director of the Evaluation Department at the China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Centre under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, admitted that while the Ministry of Education doesn't have "clear-cut standards", an important factor for UK institutions wishing to establish transnational education operations in China is to ensure a "reasonable teaching capacity" with enough faculty and resources to adequately meet the needs of the co-operation.

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*"The biggest issue is the introduction of teaching resources. This is something you have to meet so you have to think about quantity, but we don't have a specific number."*

**Lin Mengquan**  
Director, Evaluation Department, China Academic Degrees  
and Graduate Education Development Centre

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Dr Lin explained that the new, tougher measures on the ratio of resources to be provided by the overseas institution in a transnational education partnership will apply to newly reviewed and newly approved projects, adding "it's a tough measure that is here to stay".

Chairing one of the breakout discussion sessions, Professor Healey, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Nottingham Trent University, cited the lack of transparency around China's transnational education legislation as a considerable barrier to partnerships, noting that his institution was awarded a second joint-degree license six months after being awarded its first, whereas they were under the impression that the regulatory period between licenses was four years.

One UK attendee gave an emotional plea for more clear-cut guidelines: "I beg for greater transparency from the Ministry of Education because we are desperate to work properly and follow the rules. If we are going to do things by the book, we need to be able to read the book."

A representative from the China Education Association for International Exchange, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education, sought to reassure the UK delegates present by explaining that while the number of newly approved joint programmes is being reduced in a bid to increase overall quality, the UK is “doing a really great job” in terms of getting its new programmes approved. Since Chinese New Year (around mid-February 2016), the UK had six of seven applications approved, compared to the US, which had only eight of 17 approved, and Australia, which had zero approvals from five applications.

Although there is a numerical quota for the number of new joint programmes, that number has not and likely will not be shared by the Ministry of Education, explained Mister Zong Wu, Deputy Secretary-General at the China Education Association for International Exchange. He admitted that the application process “is kind of a competition”, and “maybe they will give 100 licenses”. But while the exact figures were undisclosed, he re-emphasised that critical to the success of an application is that the UK and Chinese institutions work together in the crafting of it, and that the academic subject or subjects being proposed are appropriate to the needs of the region and will be beneficial to the competitiveness of students.

In summing up, Professor Healey said it was generally agreed that “a degree of judgement is being exercised by the Ministry (of Education), and so there is a purpose to not having very explicit rules.”

Offering some assistance, Dr Lin, explained that his organisation is collating a selection of cases that show best practice on transnational education partnerships, in order to best share their experience and knowledge in that area.

## Driving Success in TNE

The workshop sessions provided a platform for faculty, administrators and officials to share best practice on the wide range of factors that drive successful transnational education partnerships.

Mutual interest and enthusiasm was seen as critical, at both the governance level and also within the teaching faculty. The active involvement of senior leadership is important, especially within the comparatively ‘top-down’ Chinese system, but the point was made that any transnational education deal should avoid relying on a single person or driving force, and instead should seek to acquire a broad foundation of grassroots support, too.

Clear, regular and responsive channels of communication was another factor put forward by many delegates, including a representative from the University of Salford, who explained that the sharing of good practice, especially in teaching, had been instrumental in the success of her institution’s transnational education endeavours.

Professor Carmen, Academic Director of the University of Glasgow-Nankai Joint Graduate School, urged that for the most successful communication, the UK institution needs to have representatives on the ground in China, ideally on a



permanent basis, especially if they are to be in a position to influence or respond to management directives and decisions.

The speed of follow-up engagement, together with a great deal of patience and the understanding that successful partnerships take time to form, were also mooted as important drivers of success. Together with the obvious yet fundamental idea that both sides of the transnational education partnership should be basically compatible to begin with.

Finally, a mutual respect of each other's legal requirements, such as the compulsory study of Chinese modules, or the UK's data protection regulations for students, was put forward as another important area to ensure the smooth running of transnational education partnerships.

## Student Experience

At the heart of any academic endeavour are the students, therefore a key part of the workshop's discussions was devoted to ensuring an equitable experience for transnational education students, in terms of academic studies, cultural life, and the campus experience.

The equivalence of campus facilities on both sides of the partnership, including minor yet important details like the provision of out-of-hours access, was put forward, together with the need to encourage and facilitate students to engage with the governance of their institutions, in the vein of the UK's National Union of Students.

The question of identity - whether students identify as being from a UK university, a Chinese university, or both - was found to be different in various cases. It was also argued that more mechanisms need to be put in place to identify and support poor English skills, with the suggestion that UK students could help out as teaching assistants.

An issue raised by several delegates was how to ensure that students seamlessly integrate themselves into a UK-style education. It was suggested that induction weeks and cultural events for Chinese students, together with preparatory modules on how UK courses are taught, would be beneficial, as well as exploring how to encourage greater class participation from Chinese students who are more institutionally introverted.

During the workshop, two Chinese students engaged in transnational education programmes in China were invited to share their personal experiences with the delegates. They offered a range of plaudits for the UK-China transnational education experience, including the chance to be part of group assignments and gain team-building, debating and communication skills, as well as the benefit of having the freedom to question the teacher and open up discussions in class.

It was suggested by one of the two students that to further improve transnational education, the frequency of UK teachers coming to China could be increased, because the students found that they accumulated a great deal of questions between visits, and while email channels were available, face-to-face consultations were always the most effective.

## Looking to the Future

In order to ensure a rich and resilient future for UK-China cross-border education, a long-term view to relationship-building, a commitment to putting quality before profit, greater inter-agency cooperation for quality assurance, an integrated teacher system, and greater interaction from industry in the UK and China were agreed to be key focus points.

In the short term, a regular newsletter on transnational education, furnished with 'Frequently Asked Questions' to assist new providers, and acting as a platform for the sharing of good practice, would be of benefit to stakeholders.

Similarly, Dr Fabrizio Trifiro, Deputy Head of International at the Quality Assurance Agency, suggested that another way to help share information on regulations and best practice would be via sector-wide events, facilitated by the Quality Assurance Agency.

It was also put forward that organisations in China could do more to promote the virtues of up-and-coming Chinese universities, which UK institutions are less familiar with, and that an up-to-date platform or league table that assesses a greater range of Chinese institutions would be a useful driver for more partnerships.

In a breakout session on "Leadership Management", there were calls for the Quality Assurance Agency to publish a guide for transnational education partners, as well as furnishing the Chinese side with their future strategy for quality assurance. Furthermore, a comprehensive directory of quality assurance agencies would help provide clarity to partners on the ground.

## Beijing Statement

An important step on the path towards greater harmony for UK-China transnational education, and the natural conclusion of the workshop, was the formal announcement of the Beijing Statement, a set of agreed principles aimed at enhancing the quality assurance of transnational education programmes between the two countries.

The agreement was heralded as a "red letter day for transnational education relations" by Jazreel Goh, the British Council's Director of Education Marketing.

Jointly developed by the British Council, the International Unit, the Quality Assurance Agency, the China Education Association for International Exchange, and the China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Centre, in consultation with the sector, the Beijing Statement sets out a commitment to improving cross-border education through a range of agreed measures and principles, including better communication and the sharing of data and information, and an enhancement of inter-agency cooperation in quality assurance.



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