
Graduate employability and the relevance of skills that students leave university with are key challenges facing higher education in many countries.

Indeed, there are concerns amongst education leaders globally that as the number of young people receiving higher education increases, many will struggle to secure jobs that meet their expectations, particularly in the face of increasing global competition and tough economic times since the 2008 financial crisis.

Data from organisations such as the World Bank shows that graduates in many countries are in fact ill-equipped for the workplace, based on employer feedback, prompting soul-searching within universities about what should constitute education in the 21st century, and their roles to foster it.

Maintaining the economic miracle: The challenge for China

China, despite its rapid economic growth, faces the same challenge. And because of its sheer size, the numbers of graduates who cannot find jobs is alarmingly high. As many as one million, or more than 20 per cent of the total, are left unemployed after leaving university each year, according to Professor Ding Xiaohao, Chair of the Academic Committee of the Graduate School of Education at Peking University. She was speaking at the British Council Going Global 2013 conference in Dubai, in the session *Driving China's Economy – Can Education Deliver?*

Professor Ding was one of four senior academics who shared perspectives on how the education sector must transform to support continued economic growth.

Professor Zhong Weihe, President of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China, said that the world had witnessed an “economic miracle” in China, with GDP growing an average 10 per cent over the last decade. This has been accompanied by massive expansion of higher education. In 30 years, the number of university graduates has grown from 30,000 a year to more than six million. But he questioned whether the sector was able to support the next phase of economic development.

Professor Ding argued that it was not. Universities were hampered by lack of autonomy to develop their own strengths to support market needs and disparities in investment between institutions. Graduate unemployment was masked by the fact that many turned to informal and part-time work, a trend seen in Western countries hit hard by economic crisis. Starting salaries for graduates were also declining.

Meanwhile, she shared findings from a survey of companies in China which indicated that they struggle to find graduates with skills they need. These are the soft, so-called employability skills, such as teamwork, the ability to communicate, analyse, think logically, solve problems and learn continuously. Traits such as ethics, dedication and responsibility are also required but lacking.

The role of TVET

As China addresses the employability issue, the TVET sector should have a greater role. Professor Shi Weiping, Director of Institute of Vocational and Adult Education, East China Normal University in Shanghai, and Vice-President of China Society of Vocational and Technical Education (CSVET), argued that China now faces twin challenges, which TVET must address.

The country can no longer rely on exports for growth. But significant domestic growth is only possible if its large pool of surplus labour can be brought into the skilled, knowledge economy. However, much of the 200 million migrant labour force and rural population remain unskilled.

The second challenge is that China is approaching the so-called Lewis Turning Point when, by the end of this decade, its industry will no longer have a sufficient supply of cheap labour to ensure profitability and must turn to new technologies and automation for growth. However, the education system is not yet ready to support such business transformation.

National and institution policies address the issue

China now needs to implement reforms so that education can meet changing economic realities. From the discussion it was clear that this needs to involve strengthened links with industry and continuing curriculum reform at all levels, so young people are better equipped with the skills the economy needs.

The Ministry of Education and individual institutions are taking action in this direction. Professor Yan Xinping Vice President for Administration Affairs and Postgraduate Education, Wuhan University of Technology (WUT), cited the 2011 Collaborative Innovation Plan by the Ministries of Education and Finance, which aims to build co-operation among universities and enterprises, research institutes, government departments and international institutions, to support research and innovation. The MoE also promotes subject areas linked to strategic industries.

WUT has developed models for such co-operation. It has 35 joint research centres for research and talent development and 265 campus practice-based centres. Enterprise help commercialise WUT research and create opportunities for internships for its students. Key industries such as ship-building are also involved in curriculum development.

From the discussion it was clear that TVET needs modernising, so curricula can better meet industry needs. Collaboration between the sector and industry, as well as between TVET colleges and higher education, must be a priority, so students can progress between the education levels, and the workplace. Currently, universities can admit just a small minority of students from the vocational sector.

Internationalisation: a key role

If TVET graduates cannot progress locally, some can do so through international qualifications, often in partnership with TVET colleges. Collaboration can also support system and curriculum reform in the sector so qualifications are benchmarked internationally and against industry needs.

Professor Zhong, meanwhile, affirmed that internationalisation will be important for graduates to work globally, in foreign companies in China and Chinese companies active internationally. This may be through international programmes delivered in China, or studying overseas. Academic exchange is also important, as is attracting more international students to China.

International research collaboration, meanwhile, will be necessary to support innovation, with a two-way flow of talent and ideas. However, it will be important that this innovation not only serves industry but improvement of education, so that students are no longer short-changed in the skills they develop.

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NOTES

About Going Global

The above is a summary of the China session discussed at Going Global conference in March 2013.

Going Global is an annual conference hosted by the British Council, offering an open forum for global leaders of international education to discuss issues facing the international education community. Since its inception in 2004, Going Global has grown from a bi-annual event in the UK to an annual event travelling the globe. Each year it attracts over 1,000 registered delegates from across the tertiary (further and higher) education sectors and a variety of other industries with perspectives on international education.

The conferences consist of a series of sessions based around the year's chosen themes. Sessions take the form of panel debates, multi-presentation sessions and poster presentations. The event provides the platform for networking. Several sponsored or private events take place around the conferences, which has become a fixture of the global education calendar.

The China session '*Driving China's Economy - Can Education Deliver?*' consists of the following panellists:

Susan Milner

Director Education British Council China

Professor Zhong Weihe

President, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

Professor Yan Xinping

Vice President for Administration Affairs and Postgraduate Education, Wuhan University of Technology

Prof. Dr Shi Weiping

Professor and Director, Institute of Vocational and Adult Education, East China Normal University

Professor Ding Xiaohao

Chair, Academic Committee, Graduate School of Education, University of Peking China

Going Global 2013 - Themes

Global education: knowledge-based economies for 21st century nations

In the twenty first century, knowledge based economies will create the wealth, prosperity and well-being of nations. Research and tertiary education systems are primary drivers of these, playing three key roles. They produce cutting edge knowledge; they transfer, exchange and apply that to drive innovation; and they educate and skill knowledge workers. For these three roles to build knowledge and innovation in a globalised world, they must themselves be globally connected. Cutting edge research requires world-class research partners from across the globe; major innovation requires not only researchers but also businesses and investors to collaborate across national boundaries; knowledge workers need to develop international competences and skills to be effective in the future world.

Going Global 2013 examined the extent to which these roles and systems are internationalised and what impact they have on the wealth, prosperity and well-being of nations, communities and cultures. The conference reviewed and debated current practices, systems and delivery mechanisms. It identifies future trends, and explores the challenges and opportunities these present for research and tertiary systems in creating knowledge-based economies for 21st century nations.