Internationalisation with Chinese Characteristics – Tracing the Development Path of a Thoroughly Modern Chinese University

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Abstract

In order to achieve competitive advantage in both national and international markets, universities around the world are increasingly adopting strategies for internationalisation. Internationalisation of a university refers to the process of integrating an international, intercultural and global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of education and research of the university. It is defined as an ongoing, future-oriented, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision that involves many stakeholders working to change the internal dynamics of an institution to respond and adapt appropriately to an ever-changing external environment. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the challenges of a new university to acquire a strong local academic identity and profile to answer the needs of a knowledge-based society driven by globalisation and to highlight the main challenges for the sector in the future. This research found some perceptions of the meaning of internationalisation of higher education in the Chinese context – learning for self-improvement, nationalism – which differentiate Chinese models of internationalisation from those in the West. Moreover, the dominant motivation for internationalisation in the Chinese university is academic development, which is different from the Western universities’ more economic rationales. These differences can be attributed to the history of the modernisation of higher education in China, the impact of nationalist revolution on higher education and dual-managerial systems in higher education institutions (HEIs) which involve the Communist Party Committee and the university president.

Keywords: Higher education, internationalisation, China

Introduction

Universities across the world are seeking to internationalise, and Chinese universities are all involved to a greater or lesser extent, not least because internationalisation is an important criterion on the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) and Shanghai Jiaotong scales. Countries across the world, including China, have been actively participating in the global ranking exercises, aimed at enhancing the competitiveness and reputation of their higher education (HE) systems globally. The quest for world-class status has become a prominent agenda reshaping university governance.

The study reported here focuses on the Chinese context, and the case of one university in particular. The rapid growth of China’s economy, combined with a shortage of domestic supply, has resulted in a tremendous demand for internationalised higher education (Altbach, 2009; Chiang, 2012; Helms, 2008; Morgan & Wu, 2011; World Bank, 2011).

The goal of becoming a global or international university is one of the main drivers of use of English. Ritzen (2004:36) stated that it is not possible to be a true international university without attracting students from a wide range of cultures and nations. One way for universities in non-English-speaking countries to compete with their counterparts in English-speaking countries is to include English-medium instruction in their academic offer, leading to what Graddol (2006) sees as one of the main drivers of globalisation of English. Doiz et al. (2011) stated that it is indeed the case for many Asian and European universities. Yang (2002) indicated that the use of English is also seen as one of the most substantial factors influencing the internationalisation of many Chinese universities. Kurtan (2004) extended this idea by suggesting that, in the globalized higher education space, internationalisation is necessary even to attract domestic students.

Background context

Traditionally, China’s higher education sector had been relatively disengaged from the international arena. This was to change with reform and becoming more open (Hayhoe, 1989; Zhou, 2006), which created a desire to access international
capacity to deliver higher education and international expertise in research and teaching. The economic and political significance of China and the rapid expansion of and investment in higher education attracted the interest of foreign universities from around the world which sought to respond to emerging international opportunities through the recruitment of Chinese students, the delivery of programmes in China and the development of research partnerships and networks.

The Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 urges Chinese higher education institutions to “open their best faculties to the world, and to participate in or set up collaborative international academic organisations” (China, 2010: 21). This exhortation has been very well received by the main exporters of higher education, including the USA, UK and Australia, who have appreciated the opportunities offered to expand beyond their national boundaries. High-profile politicians have encouraged and supported their national higher education sectors to internationalise, and China has been seen as a particularly desirable destination.

However, Sino-foreign cooperation in terms of branch campuses of foreign institutions in China has been met with a decidedly mixed reaction. The response to this has been for Chinese institutions to intensify their internationalisation efforts. Internationalisation in higher education is multifaceted; its meanings and interpretations shift according to the various rationales, incentives, and political and economic circumstances within which it takes place (Callan, 2000). Forces both within and outside the university usually influence the direction and extent of internationalisation (Cuthbert, 2002). The internationalisation of any university depends on institutionalising a strategic planning process that is representative in that it recognises and utilises the power of the culture within which it occurs (Chan & Dimmock, 2008).

Due to a policy of economic rationalism, together with the practice of social reform and the open-door policy, which supported the development of education in general and education reform in particular, higher education (HE) was regarded as an important cornerstone in developing China into a global economic power. Chinese HE started to seriously internationalise based on the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000) and was incentivised by the Chinese entry into World Trade Organization (WTO). Since then a strong movement of cooperation between Chinese universities and Western universities began. Recently, China has established educational relationships with countries in Europe, Central, North and South America, Oceania, Africa, and the rest of Asia. Agreements on mutual recognition of academic degrees have been signed between China and many other countries, with a targeted focus on highly-ranked institutions. In the meanwhile, international educational cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding on educational cooperation have been signed with, for example, the USA, Australia, Canada, the UK, and New Zealand (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2007).

The institution in question is a young Chinese university in Guangdong Province, southern China. Established in 2012, the case-study university is a public institution with a student cohort almost 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The university is expanding quickly, thanks in no small part to goals being clearly defined by the institution, with one of those goals being internationalisation.

**Literature review**

The past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented expansion in the scale of international activity within the global tertiary education sector. The factors driving internationalisation are well-established; on the demand side, a global labour market, the needs of a knowledge economy, and the desire to learn from the world’s best have all encouraged students and governments to seek greater opportunities for international study and international partnerships. On the supply side, declining mobility costs, developments in ICT, trade liberalisation and increased private sector investment have lead to an increase in the availability of opportunities for international engagement (Knight, 2004). The dramatic expansion in numbers of students studying internationally and in the number of international institutional partnerships is evidence of the growth in scale. The diversity of forms of international activity, ranging from traditional student recruitment and mobility, to transnational curriculum and delivery partnerships, collaborative research networks and international campuses is testament to the expansion in scope.

The international dimension of higher education is being increasingly promoted on the national and institutional levels in many countries. The national level has a significant influence on the international dimension of higher education through policy, funding, programs and regulatory frameworks. Yet it is actually at the institutional level that the real process of internationalisation is taking place, as Knight (2004: 6-7) notes, with the institutional level reflecting national policy.

Ellingboe (1998) observed five components which are integral to the process applied in internationalising a HE institution:
College leadership;

Faculty members’ international involvement in activities with colleagues, research sites, and institutions worldwide;

The availability, affordability, accessibility, and transferability of study abroad programs for students;

The presence and integration of international students, scholars and visiting faculty into campus life; and

International co-curricular units (residence halls, conference planning centres, student unions, career centres, cultural immersion and language centres, student activities and student organisations).

Internationalisation of higher education in China

The development of internationalisation of higher education started at the end of the 1970s in China, with the 1978 “Reform and Open Policy”, leading to the Chinese government and universities increasing their efforts to try to connect with other universities and higher education globally. The Chinese government not only sponsored students and scholars to study abroad, but also encouraged self-funded students and scholars to go abroad for higher education in the 1990s (although students were initially sent from China to study abroad in the 1970s, according to Pan et al., 2005). China’s entry into the WTO in 2001 boosted the speed of internationalisation in higher education (Ong & Chan, 2012).

A report from the Center for China and Globalization (CCG, 2018) identified China as being the world’s number one place of origin for international students, accounting for over 30% of the total in the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and for almost 50% in South Korea. In some European countries such as UK, Sweden, and Switzerland, China is also a major source of international students, although the share is less than 10%.

However, the report also highlighted the growth in the number of returning overseas Chinese students has exceeded that of the Chinese studying abroad, with 432,500 Chinese students abroad returning to China in 2016.

Additionally, the report points out an increase in the number of international students in China, partly attributed to China’s policies to provide opportunities to international students after they graduate. These students are mainly from what China terms ‘Belt and Road’ countries, such as Thailand, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Laos, and this 20% increase has significantly reduced China’s deficit in international education. It is also testament to the success of the State Council and Central Government’s 2010 Plan of Studying in China. In this Plan, the aim is that by the end of 2020, China will be the world’s number one nation to receive the largest number of international students (CSC, 2012).

Sino-foreign ventures

As a consequence of the more open political context, the number of Sino-Foreign Joint Ventures in China, grew from 20 in 2013 to 28 in 2015, making it the second largest importer of branch campuses after the United Arab Emirates, which had 32 (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2015). The majority of these are niche institutions with relatively small numbers of students. However, four are on a larger scale (Duke Kunshan University, established in 2014; New York Shanghai, established in 2013; Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University, established in 2006; The University of Nottingham Ningbo China, established in 2004) which seek to offer a range of disciplines at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and to reflect the quality and experience of the institution’s home campuses (Stanfield & Qi, 2012).

These institutions have had mixed success. For example, Cai and Hall (2016) found that, although staff found many benefits from working on an international branch campus, they were insufficiently prepared for the structural and cultural differences inherent in working as an academic in China. The authors argue that university level discourse, communicated through policy and marketing texts, which promotes the vision of a diverse international university community, means not enough attention is being paid to the structural, political and cultural differences inherent in working as an academic in China.

However, in recent years, the trend seems to have shifted back in favour of Chinese universities pursuing the path of internationalisation, as can be seen in the race to be ranked on one of the world university ranking lists.

Rankings

The orientation towards university rankings from the 1990s can be considered as the result of the perceived need for quality assurance, especially since the implementation of the Outline of Educational Reform and Development in China in 1994. The title Project 211, which the Chinese Government launched in 1995, refers to the aim of building up 100 top level higher
education institutions and key disciplines in the twenty-first century. Project 985, also familiar to anyone working in the Chinese higher education context, derives from the month in which it was announced, May 1998, when Jiang Zemin, the then President of People’s Republic of China declared that China was in need of some first-rate universities on an international level (Adams & Song, 2009).

One of the key evaluation criteria used to compile worldwide university ranking lists is the degree of internationalisation of individual institutions, which is based on the percentage of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) courses and the proportion of international faculty and students at the institution. Since boosting performance under the ‘internationalisation’ criterion could be achieved more easily than, for example, improving the quality of research publications, the introduction of EMI has become an attractive proposition for many Chinese higher education institutions.

Globalisation and internationalisation

Altbach defines globalisation ‘as the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement’ and ‘internationalisation includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions—and even individuals—to cope with the global academic environment (Altbach, 2007:290). Both Altbach and Knight (2007) consider internationalisation of higher education as one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalisation. They view globalisation as being broader than internationalisation since the latter means relations between two nations while the former refers to blurring of borders. Globalisation is related mainly to the economy, as it represents some context which forces internationalisation processes. In turn, internationalisation is related to strategies and policies primarily on national and institutional levels.

Globalisation has been described as the combined phenomena whereby people are more globally connected than ever before through international travel and international communication, where information and financial capital are transmitted almost instantaneously around the globe, and where goods and services produced in one part of the world are universally available (Porter, 2008). Academia is not immune to the phenomena underlying globalisation, as is evidenced by the proliferation of business schools (Hay, 2008; Doh, 2010), and by the associations representing both education institutions and their corporate clients.

According to Bevelander (2010), institutions have tended to internationalise their educational programs by following three, sometimes sequential, trajectories. First, they increase their currently served client (student) segment’s understanding of global business practice by changes in the curriculum. Second, they reach out to new international clients (students) to add classroom diversity. Finally, they integrate academic and behavioral aspects of an internationally oriented curriculum, and the diverse experiences of an internationally recruited student body to produce graduates capable of working effectively anywhere in the world.

Internationalisation of any university is directed to internationalising the educational experience for students so they might better perform in an international and multicultural economic environment. It has also transformed the higher education landscape in the last two decades; a more globalised and inter-connected world has encouraged governments to foster academic relations and opportunities with university partners in other countries (Knight, 2008). A key driver of internationalisation is its ability to generate revenue (Ngo, 2011) and administrators, faculty, and staff in higher education are all critical to its success (Choudaha & Contreras, 2014). Nations remain distinct economically, socially, and culturally, but can become connected and inter-related through the internationalisation processes.

Many Asian universities have developed internationalisation strategies with the aim of being more competitive in the international higher education market, with a view to attracting foreign students, recruiting international scholars, supporting cross-campus research collaborations, and increasing performance. Efforts have tended to focus on three areas: first, teaching, including student exchanges, branch and offshore campuses, joint degree programs, and internationalised curricula; second, cross-border research partnerships, faculty development, and accreditation processes; and third, alignment of instructional quality, curricula, assessments, and increased student mobility.

Singapore is an example of where the government developed an internationalisation strategy that aimed to reduce the number of local outbound students through improvements to domestic study options, the promotion of the return of graduates after completion of their studies, and the deliberate recruitment of incoming international students into the Singapore workforce to address internationalisation concerns (Dquilá, 2013; Ziguras & Gribble, 2015). Government policies in Singapore were developed to encourage specific local student values and attributes, including intercultural awareness.
and engagement, an international competitive edge, and global citizenship – all through their internationalised curriculum. In China, the internationalisation of higher education has been handled a little differently. A significant trend in China’s internationalisation strategy has been to export Chinese knowledge, part of a process of cultural integration between China and the West (Rui, 2014).

A broader classification of modes of internationalisation is provided by Knight (2006) who focuses on the component parts of higher education and the ways in which they might cross borders. This gives rise to a four-part classification based on the movement of:

People — staff and student mobility, including exchange and study in international institutions.

Programmes—a programme from an institution in one country is delivered in another.

Providers — essentially, this involves the formal establishment of a physical presence.

Services and Projects — this includes a diversity of forms of cooperation, whether directly research-related or more obviously focused on pedagogy, curriculum development, quality assurance or management.

The role of government

With regards to internationalisation, the regulatory and supervisory role of the Chinese government is embedded in the daily operation of higher education institutions. The role is played out through a range of examination and control procedures or in a more subtle way via policies and funding programs that guide institutional efforts into the areas prioritised by the government. Up until now, government approval has had to be obtained if any staff member wanted to go abroad on business for any reason, including attending a conference, giving lectures, undertaking joint research, etc. Nowadays Chinese institutions are encouraged to establish partnerships and joint teaching programs with foreign institutions. Yet, to do this they have to pass a special qualification examination to obtain authorisation beforehand from the educational authorities. After reaching any agreement with their foreign partner, the Chinese institution still must register their joint program in detail with the educational authorities. Clearly, the Chinese government is vacillating between allowing more authority and keeping tight control. This can be seen also at the institutional level, where a dual system of university governance sees the traditional management system having equal weight with the Community Party management system, which often leads to tensions being played out at institutional and even departmental level.

Research question

This research aims at providing the groundwork for understanding the particular meaning, implementation and evaluation of international higher education in the Chinese context.

Therefore, the main research questions are:

What does internationalisation mean to the case university?

How has the case university sought to ‘internationalise’?

What barriers does the case university face in defining and implementing internationalisation, and how might these be overcome?

Method

A qualitative case methodology based on in-depth interviews and documentary analysis was adopted in this study. Although the case study approach can be a very satisfactory methodology, it has some limitations. The research findings were discussed with those who had participated in the study to obtain their reactions and opinions, with the aim of enhancing the validity of the conclusions. The reliability of the findings was improved by triangulation through the use of multiple research approaches, methods and techniques in the same study (Hussey & Hussey, 1997; Sham, 2004). This would overcome potential bias and sterility.

An exploratory qualitative research design, involving semi-structured, face to face interviews was undertaken to explore the views of senior leaders and faculty. Interviews with ten HE leaders included discussion of their key concerns, from their perspective, in order to better understand the key drivers, and challenges, surrounding HE internationalisation. Specifically,
interviews were intended to seek insights into: first, how internationalisation was conceptualized by the participants; second, what key factors were critical to the success of internationalisation of HE in the context of the university; third, what had been achieved; and fourth, what challenges had been faced. Research methods should align with the research problem, with selected paradigms and methodologies shaping the choice of methods (Silverman, 2010). Semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer flexibility in selecting lines of questioning, and probing further if required (Lloyd and Gatherer, 2006). They were also used because perceptions of HE internationalisation in the university were that it was uncertain and dynamic, and such interviews would enable useful exploration of attitudes, motives, rationales and practices being investigated. Interviews with ten participants were conducted. Purposive, snowball sampling was used.

Thematic analysis was undertaken on the transcripts, and themes reflecting participants’ perceptions and views about higher education internationalisation emerged. Manual color-coding coding of themes and concepts (Creswell, 2009) was used to extract relevant sections of text, capturing the different views and perspectives of the participants and comparing them to the relevant literature. Each transcript was worked through and coded into themes and sub-themes with colored highlighting of texts used to identify texts. Then, a summary description of each theme/sub-theme’s meaning was written. Interpretation of the data followed where sample texts, and associated interpretive commentaries, were reviewed with reference to current literature, and recognising both similarities and differences with participants’ views and experiences. The findings are presented below.

Results and discussion

Five main themes emerged, namely quality of provision, international reputation, teaching staff, research and student recruitment. Each of these will be discussed in turn, and are grouped so as to answer the main research questions.

Research question – what internationalisation means to the university

Quality of provision

The quality of research and teaching programs featured strongly in internationalisation discussions with the participants. High quality research and teaching outcomes were believed to result in higher quality faculty being attracted to the institution. The domino knock-on effect was that this would, in turn, result in higher quality graduates. It needs to be mentioned that more than 80% of graduates in the university in this case study undertake postgraduate study abroad, primarily in North America, with many studying at some of the world’s top-ranked institutions. This not only raises the international profile of the university, but also provides added impetus to deliver high quality, internationally-recognised programs:

Quality is the top priority, especially the quality of our students, who are our product, and our partners are impressed with their level. The faculty are selected carefully as well, so having quality programs is making us more successful. We’re getting better and better; we have more and more English courses; we’re absolutely committed to success (Participant 4).

The university is moving quickly towards becoming an English medium institution. This has not been without issues, as course design needs to be integrated with courses taught in Chinese, the English language proficiency of students and faculty needs to be equal to the task, and the lack of Chinese language proficiency of international students needs to be taken into consideration. Teaching methods also need to be compatible with the characteristics of programs. This is acknowledged by the participants:

We need to be aware that to move towards having everything in English is necessary, but we mustn’t forget that we need the language level of our teachers to be up to the level required. The students have English language classes to help them get to the level, but maybe we need to be more careful to see what the language level of our teachers is. However, we’re making good progress, by hiring from abroad, where the teaching methods are also more up to date. Some very good teaching happens already in China, particularly in Math and Science, so we are making sure we have top quality (Participant 9).

The quality of tuition, especially for a university engaging with international partners, is considered vital:

Our international partners are providing some joint programs with us. They are important, so we need to meet them often, to assure them that our programs are up to the level. If they are comfortable with the quality of our programs, we can grow more. Quality is in the ability of our students and the level of our professors (Participant 5).
Ultimately, quality also will ensure an international reputation is enhanced.

**International reputation**

The international reputation of the university was of concern to all participants. It was believed to be important to promote that reputation internationally, and especially to be ranked internationally:

*We need to internationalise in a proactive way, and then we have to develop our vision in order to not only be strong in science and engineering, but also economics, management, the arts, and law with accreditation by international bodies as soon as possible. We have to spread our name in China, in Asia and then spread it on a worldwide basis. We need to feature in the global rankings – that’s crucial* (Participant 8).

Rankings was an area mentioned by all participants, and it seems that this is really what internationalisation means to them on a fundamental level, as it is an acknowledgement of how their education system has improved over the years. Some participants felt that the greatest challenge lay with pushing the internationalisation agenda further, speaking of the need to maintain international educational standards, and sending Chinese academics overseas to other universities, as well as bringing scholars and students from overseas to China:

*We need to make clear that education is not just for within China; it has to reach international standards. We need to send our scholars abroad on exchange, and the same with our students. It is not just about bringing scholars and students here* (Participant 2).

Many of the participants spoke at length about the benefits of internationalisation, for their university, and for China. A strong feeling of pride in doing this for China prevailed. One participant spoke about the benefits of international cooperation for internationalising teaching and research methods, so as to ensure the university adhered to international standards and increased its reputation:

*More international cooperation will make teaching and learning better. Teaching staff can update their knowledge, research has a higher impact, and students can achieve international standards. This will grow our reputation* (Participant 10).

**Research question – How the university has sought to internationalise**

**Teaching staff**

All of the participants highlighted the role of teaching staff in the internationalisation process. Employing more foreign teaching staff was seen as a way to promote internationalisation:

*We might invite foreign professors from partner institutions to deliver some courses in English. We may also employ foreign staff for even junior positions to create a new environment and atmosphere in our campus. Maybe we can’t do this in a big way in the beginning, but maybe also we have to force this a little, otherwise the pace will be too slow* (Participant 1).

This view was shared by others:

*In the process of internationalisation, internationalising teaching staff is necessary. It is maybe the most important thing. Moreover, we could invite more foreign staff to work at our university. We’ve already started to do this, but we need to be honest, and say that most of the foreign staff are returning Chinese who have a foreign passport* (Participant 6).

Participant six highlights what is actually happening when it comes to recruiting foreign teaching faculty, as the vast majority of such faculty are what is known as returning Chinese, i.e. those who grew up in China and undertook their undergraduate studies there, before moving abroad to compete their postgraduate studies and having lived and worked there since then. Most have acquired citizenship of their adopted country in the process, while still retaining Chinese citizenship (however, if a returning Chinese academic is offered the presidency of a Chinese university, then they have to give up their foreign passport). Now they are being lured back to China with generous salaries, promotion opportunities and research funding. Non-Chinese nationals are being recruited in far smaller numbers, usually for less high-profile positions, and without the same incentives. Therefore, to speak of internationalisation of teaching staff is perhaps a little disingenuous, though it is an aspect that is played up when it comes to international university rankings, with little mention of the dual citizenship involved.

In addition to teaching staff, research was seen to be one of the main driving forces of the internationalisation process.
Research

High quality research cooperation was seen by almost all participants as being crucial in the drive for more internationalisation. This could be achieved by faculty exchange, as mentioned by some of the participants, inviting more visiting scholars to the campus and using research in a better way to help underpin teaching on the university’s programmes.

The need for publishing high quality research (in the English language) in internationally-renowned journals was also considered central to the internationalisation process:

*Publishing academic research is really important in the process of internationalisation – in the highest quality journals (Participant 3).*

Publishing in high-ranking international academic journals in the English language was seen as being rather challenging, but it was felt that strides have been made in this area. Participants also pointed to the fact that the university is hosting more international conferences to share research achievements, which they believed would assist in boosting their university’s research profile and international standing:

*Research is the most important. We know this. We already have some institutes on campus that will produce future Nobel laureates. Our plan is also to cooperate with our strategic partners to work on the international conferences (Participant 7).*

The case-study university is very fortunate to have significant budgets available, thanks to government funding, to fund international collaborative programs for teaching, research, and student exchanges. However, a few participants admitted that more work needs to be done on international conferences, as these have not been as successful to date as might have been hoped. This was one of the challenges to internationalisation that was identified, with the other being international student recruitment.

Research question - Challenges to internationalisation

Student recruitment

Attracting overseas students has not gone as smoothly as hoped:

*We need to do more to attract international students, and that needs to start by making sure they can survive here easily. This has been a problem for us, as it means accommodation, food, all the daily things and not only academics, need to be planned more carefully. We need to see what our expectations are, what their expectations are, and we need to help the students to accept them (Participant 2).*

This is an issue that needs to be sensitively managed. The university’s original plan was to expand international student recruitment very quickly, but they have since taken on board the sentiments expressed by all stakeholders, and are now recruiting international students in a more phased manner.

By the same token, as their reputation for academic excellence increases, they can afford to be stricter in terms of recruiting Chinese students, and select the best.

Maintaining international standards in the university, while also enhancing the quality of the academic experience for students, were seen as ongoing challenges. So, too, was the drive towards joint-program agreements, as those involved in negotiations needed to have a significant level of experience, to persuade international partners that the university is capable of delivering sustained quality. Preparing students for the marketplace was not addressed in a significant way by the participants, although there was a need expressed for a greater variety and breadth of programs. Human resources and administrative challenges, as well as infrastructure challenges were seen as factors that could delay or slow down the internationalisation process. The lack of English language skills of support staff (though steps have been taken to remedy this, with the provision of English language training) and the lack of understanding of international culture were also seen as challenges. All the participants acknowledged that most of their support staff did not have international experience.

Recommendations

Though it did not arise in the study, a major issue facing higher education in China is graduate unemployment – and this is on the increase. International partnerships, for example, enable more students to earn a degree than otherwise could be
the case, but this may simply mean more unemployed graduates. Therefore, these partnerships need to pay serious attention to the question of the graduate labour market in China. How relevant are the educational programmes? Is there a demand for the graduate skill set being produced? This is something that needs to be considered for the future. It is related to what is considered to be one of the most relevant aspects of internationalisation mentioned by participants, namely, developing the country and its international reputation.

In addition, the concept of internationalisation ‘at home’ and the implications for curriculum content and skills development among staff and students have also become increasingly important. From the participants’ perspective, to ensure the university offers international higher education, it is imperative that English as a medium of instruction courses are staffed by faculty who are able to teach in English, and that the language level of students on such courses is equal to the task. Otherwise, the danger is that international and Chinese students will be segregated in different classes, with the Chinese students studying in their native language, which means that, on paper, lip service is being paid to internationalisation, but nothing meaningful is being implemented in practice. Maybe this will mean a review of the policy of hiring almost exclusively returning Chinese as overseas faculty, in favour a more diverse faculty body.

A traditional focus on the mobility of students and scholars has been augmented by a diversity of forms of collaboration in teaching and research, including franchising, validations, distance and online learning, international campuses, research partnerships and networks, and international research programmes. Quality assurance mechanisms will need to be developed to ensure the success of such initiatives, if the international standards mentioned by most participants are to be both attained and sustained. Though not mentioned in the study, there could be more explicit forms of cooperation between universities in China, and not just between Chinese and foreign universities, as the journey towards internationalisation is one that they have in common, as is the journey towards being highly ranked.

Conclusion

The findings highlight key implications at both institutional and national levels for China, Asia, and beyond. Internationalisation strategies and policies have been found to be critical to the development of higher education in China. Based on these findings, as mentioned in the recommendations above, universities in China may consider connecting their strategic objectives and strategic planning processes to support one another during the internationalisation journey of higher education. The findings also offered exploratory insights into what was considered important to further support the internationalisation processes, as well as highlighting the challenges that could arise. The findings presented confirmed that internationalisation was conceptualised by senior university leaders as including processes directed toward internationalisation of curricula, the support and development of international research and publication collaborations, broadening of joint teaching programs and degrees, and an enhanced global, strategic mindset of both higher education leaders and staff at all levels of the universities involved. Ensuring international standards, facilitating staff exchanges, and increasing student mobility were also considered vital constituents in the internationalisation of higher education in the case study university in particular, and in China generally.

As also mentioned in the recommendations above, the future of internationalisation in higher education in China will undoubtedly remain a topical issue but will be determined ultimately, not by finance, but by the relevance of such programs to the country’s future social and economic development. It is this area that still needs to be fully addressed.

References


