UK-CHINA HIGHER EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE REPORT

BEIJING · CHINA
22 APRIL 2014
**Background**

As the second of its type and a key component of the annual UK-China Education Summit which represents a pillar of the UK-China People to People Dialogue framework, UK-China Higher Education Roundtable was organised by the British Council China and the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE) with participation of university leaders from the UK and China at Tsinghua University in Beijing on 22 April 2014.

This event aimed to provide a platform for decision makers of universities from both countries to share their experiences and best practices, and to discuss possible joint initiatives in areas of mutual interest. Outcomes and recommendations from the roundtable have been reported back to Ministers of both countries at the 7th Education Summit held the day after in Beijing.

Dr Hao Ping, Ministry of Education China, and Rt. Hon David Willetts MP, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) opened the event highlighting how education represents one of the most important and dynamic pillars in the People to People Dialogue Framework. They agreed that UK-China cooperation has achieved important results in recent years, which brought 353 collaborative programmes. Vice Minister Hao Ping outlined how the UK-China collaboration in higher education is crucial for the ongoing reform of Chinese universities, especially in the enhancement of quality and in the achievement of a world-class status. Minister Willets focused on the importance of further strengthening UK-China collaboration in order to build a legal framework for the main issues and biggest challenges that both systems have to face in the new global environment.

**Session one: Building a modern university**

The first session investigated the balance between higher education and the role of government and the key factors of success in the UK and China cooperation.

Outlines of the main features relating to the UK and the Chinese systems were provided by the two keynote speeches. Professor Li Jiajun, President of Tianjin University, underlined how the development of modern Chinese universities has been closely tied to the needs of the government. Although in recent decades a comprehensive reform of the university system has been carried out, the prominent role of public universities hasn't changed. Strong government support and the concentration of resources are the advantages of this model, while administrative interference in the university management and contradictions between short-term and long-term developments have been identified as major challenges.

Although strong differences persist between the two systems, according to Ms Stern, Director of the UK Higher Education International Unit, the UK and China can be seen as natural partners. Both play a major role in the international academic community and the UK is now China’s second largest research collaborator. Therefore, learning from each other represents a key feature of success in UK-China collaborations, which needs to be based on reciprocity and mutual benefits;
the understanding of strengths, interests and aspirations; the support for a
diversity of institutions to engage with each other; and the strengthening of trust
and common values.

Questions were raised regarding “restructuring” the governance process within the
imperial college. Many representatives from the British side stressed that though
there is not a formal reform of the system, there is an ongoing process towards a
more clear definition and division of responsibilities between provost, chancellors
and vice-chancellors. This process is the result of the internationalisation process
but also the tentative of opening university governance to wider participation.

Session two: Universities working with business

The second session explored university-business interactions. According to
Professor Stuart Croft, Provost of University of Warwick, universities need to
strengthen relations with industries in the key aspects, including getting research
funding from industry to support research projects and research infrastructures;
making research infrastructure available to industry; creating collaborative spaces
such as technological and scientific parks; developing education and training areas
together.

In order to improve collaboration between universities and the business sector,
Professor Yu Hai-Sui, Pro Vice Chancellor International at the University of
Nottingham, identified several drivers for business engagement. He underlined how
university-business interactions are mainly based on educational and research links
which represent the basis for the strengthening of corporate partnerships. Thanks
to those, technology transfer deals can be achieved together with innovation
growth. Both universities and business partners can benefit from this collaboration.
Universities can, in fact, gain resources, credibility and relevance, and develop new
opportunities while the business sector, on the other hand, can get new talents and
ideas, as well as improving its capacity and Corporate Social Responsibility.

Professor Chen Chunsheng, Vice President of the Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU),
presented SYSU as a case-study and a successful example of conception and
practices in university-enterprise cooperation. The concept of linking business to
university represents the core vision of SYSU which put great importance on the
transition from education to employment. This result has been achieved through
the development of undergraduate and graduate programmes based on the needs
of national and local industries; the combination of excellence and an efficient
system; and a great attention to science and technology.

A major theme for this session was employability. As underlined by Professor
Malcolm Davies, Head of Ealing Law School, University of West London, universities
need to incorporate in both learning and teaching the notion of applied knowledge
that helps students to strengthen their employability in different sectors and as
professionals. On the same issue, other comments underlined the value of
international experience especially at the industry level. A very interesting insight
came from the students from the UK-China Student Forum who organised a parallel
session. They suggested increasing relations between employers and education; a
stronger effort in linking primary and secondary schools to international programmes in order to improve curricula in global terms; and a stronger emphasis on vocational education and training.

Session three: China-UK cooperation and new models of education

The third session was related to China-UK cooperation and new models of education. Its focus was on partnerships for joint education, transnational education and information technology in education.

The presentations in particular of Professor Li Yansong, Vice President of Peking University and Professor Yi Zhihong, Vice President of Renmin University, served to underline the amount and diversity of joint programmes (faculty/student mobility, joint teaching/training, joint research/publication, Confucius Institutes, multi-lateral collaboration) already in place between the UK and these key Chinese universities they represented.

Mr Steve Hill, Commercial Director of the Open University, spoke about innovation and new models of education. Mr Hill pointed out how knowledge transfers between the UK and China have achieved great results in recent years and still more has to be done in the lifelong learning and distance learning sectors. An important opportunity for future collaboration will come from the Open University sector – which in China includes over 3.5 million students - and digital education.

Among future goals and challenges to improve UK and China cooperation, many participants identified the development of two-way mobility of students. Increasing their mobility should involve facilitating more open access to visas and, as suggested by the comments of the delegates of the UK-China Student Forum, more efforts should be done in terms of integration between international and domestic students through more language classes, accommodation sharing and an information-sharing system. Many comments stressed that more efforts should be done in strengthening collaborations and exchanges among researchers - whose projects currently mainly rely on individual efforts rather than joint research programmes.

The strengthening of mutual understanding at all levels and the promotion of joint degree and exchange programmes through bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation were identified as milestones for the future direction. In terms of study areas, priorities should be focused on medicine, climate change and Nano science. Professor Yi Zhihong encouraged Chinese universities to be more involved in institution-based joint research and to increase high-level joint programmes. Referring to UK universities, she recommended her counterparts be aware of the financial restraints of UK universities that are causing a lower input in international development, and issues of over enrolment that can compromise education quality. On the other side, Professor Sir Timothy O'Shea, Principal of the University of Edinburgh, in his final remarks underlined the impressive increase of Chinese investment in education and research, which place China as the new global academic super-power. He encouraged his Chinese university counterparts to achieve stronger autonomy, while both parts should work on co-authoring
publications and joint programmes taking into account the Open University as the new frontier in education.

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