

WORLD SCIENCE

№ 4(32)
Vol.9, April 2018

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RS Global Sp. z O.O.,
Scientific Educational Center
Warsaw, Poland

Numer KRS: 0000672864
REGON: 367026200
NIP: 5213776394

Publisher Office's address:
Dolna 17,
Warsaw, Poland,
00-773

Website: <https://ws-conference.com/>

E-mail: rsglobal.poland@gmail.com

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THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN ACADEMICS' RECRUITMENT ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN WESTERN CHINA

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Abstract. *The paper deals with the impact of foreign academics' recruitment on higher education institutions in western China in terms of teaching, learning and research aspects. Peculiarities of the higher education in western provinces are presented as well as the details on foreign lecturers' recruitment as one of the tools of the internationalization process. The employment of foreigners at Chinese universities might entail specific challenges in academic and administrative perspectives which are also analyzed in the present paper.*

Keywords: *foreign academics' recruitment, higher education, teaching and learning, Western China.*

Introduction. The Chinese economic miracle started from 1978 has dramatically changed the nation's ambitions setting new benchmarks and values. Massive investments of the Chinese government in the economy of different provinces gave astonishing results and led the Chinese regions to prosperity and stability. Global competitive goals that China has nowadays due to the economic power and political significance on the international arena shape also the higher education sector in China. However, western China which has been historically less developed and economically successful than the eastern part of the country still lags behind and needs attention and efforts from the national government as well as international community in order to narrow the existing disparities in the social, economic and educational development.

In this context, internationalization has been the key priority in numerous reforms and programmes launched by the Chinese government for its western part in order to bring local universities to a higher level of excellence and efficacy. The introduced reforms promulgated a series of initiatives to engage western Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) into active internationalization process, building foreign partnership links as well as raising students' awareness and ability to deal with the cross-cultural environment. In this regard, foreign lecturers' recruitment has turned into one of the main criteria for Chinese universities to improve its ranking position and prestige. Moreover, this national strategy has opened up doors for a huge number of foreign academics coming from different countries and different academic fields who are willing to work in China. This has become subject to a lot of discussions and has risen questions about the potential of foreign lecturers, the impact of their teaching or research activity on western Chinese higher education, and the justification of hiring international experts. The paper aims to explore the above-mentioned questions and shed light on the peculiarities and role of foreign teachers' recruitment in western China which is valuable for policy-making at the country level and university governance in terms of internationalization and human resource processes.

Peculiarities of the higher education in western China. Education in western China has been in the spotlight of the national governmental policy and international organization attracting financial investment and support to struggle with the education-poverty connection. Great Western Development Strategy adopted in 2000 envisages the improvement of infrastructure, enticement of funding, increased environmental protection as well as the promotion of education along with preventing of brain drain since talented graduates and workers prefer to flow to richer provinces in Central or East China. This "Western Development" plan includes six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan), five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang), and one municipality (Chongqing). These regions are characterized as remote and barren territory inhabited by a variety of ethnic-minority groups where many people live below the poverty line. Therefore, the Chinese government points out that the implementation of the strategy has a great significance to promote sustainable growth, stimulate coordinated economic

progress between diverse regions, reduce urban-rural disparity and build common prosperity and equity through systematic changes in the field of education.

Educational reforms have been actively introduced in China since 1990s and aimed to retreat from the decades-old Soviet style in higher education management both at national and institutional levels. A range of initiatives have involved Chinese HEIs into a drastic change process bolstering four major strategies to revamp higher education system, viz., i) joint development; ii) restructuring; iii) merger, and iv) cooperation. In particular, “joint development” strategy emphasized the necessity to support universities from western provinces by selecting one HEI in each of the provinces in question and increasing annual investment for the determined institutions (Zhao & Zhu, 2010).

The attempt to emulate best practices of western education and keep pace with the most prominent universities abroad was reflected in project 211 entitled “High-level universities and key disciplinary fields” and project 985 entitled “World class universities”. Both projects were launched by the Ministry of the People's Republic of China to raise the teaching, learning and research standards in Chinese HEIs, improve institutional facilities, assist Chinese faculty in participating in conferences and trainings abroad as well as hire foreign academics and visiting scholars. However, western Chinese universities are under-represented in these significant government-funded projects as “211” or “985” (Berger, Hudson, & Blanco Ramirez, 2013).

In accordance with the “China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development” (2010-2020) western China was also encouraged to search the optimal ways to enhance quality of teaching and learning, streamline institutional management, and advance social outreach. This plan also covers the Higher Education Rejuvenation Plan for Central and Western Regions which foresees additional enrolment quotas for prospective students from central and western provinces in order to promote equity and access to higher education. Interestingly, one of the educational challenges that western China has is referred to the phenomenon of left-behind children (LBC) who are taken care and raised up by their relatives whereas their parents have to live in other places for work purposes. The study on LBC in western provinces of China showed that this group of children have weaker performance in academic self-concept, teacher-student relationship and attitude towards a school than their counterparts with different family conditions (Yao & Mao, 2008). Special care and support approaches have been elaborated in order to cope with LBC issues in order to assist them in educational challenges they face in schools and universities due to their background (Beh & Yao, 2012).

It should be noted that western provinces of China have their own unique features, challenges, and level of development. Thus, in the paper “The regional division of the higher education sector in China” Chen and Wu (2011) make a comprehensive analysis and examine the geoeconomic and social stratification of the Chinese higher education system and how this stratification affects the potential of universities in the relevant province. Based on the outcomes of their research which compared data of student enrolment with financial indicators, the authors classify the development status of the higher education at provincial level into four so-called zones: high development status and high development potential (Zone I); low development status and high development potential (Zone II); low development status and low development potential (Zone III); high development status but low development potential (Zone IV). According to the results, there is a strong regional gap among provinces since all universities in the East part of China belong to Zone I, whereas most HEIs from western China were grouped in Zone III, except Shaanxi referring to Zone IV. Although Chen and Wu argue that this discrepancy in regional development of higher education is due mostly to the funding inequality generated by the government, the researchers claim that historical and cultural aspects also impede the design of the standardized formula of funding mechanism for all universities nationwide. However, here comes another question whether the standardized funding will be welcome by all universities in all Chinese provinces or there are HEIs which benefit from the unequal distribution of finances and do not desire to alter the entrenched budget allocation.

The Plan of Strengthening Higher Education in Middle and Western China (2012-2020) is another initiative promulgated by the Ministry of Education in China to highlight the main objective to reach high quality in the higher education sector for particular regions by 2020. A variety of tasks are engraved in the implementation plan such as reinforcing disciplines and specialties which are beneficial for the regions, building a breeding ground for the talented workforce, promoting collaborative approaches to practice-oriented learning, triggering mechanisms for widening participation and equal access to higher education for students in Middle and West China. The institutional issues are also reflected in the governmental agenda, and in the nearest future HEIs in the above-mentioned parts of China are expected to optimize their management structures as well as to increase the quantity and quality of cross-regional and international exchange and cooperation.

There are still relatively few studies on higher education in western China (Lee et al., 2016). Most of the publications on educational issues in China cover the general situation in the country, providing limited or not deep enough information on the challenges of western provinces in terms of higher education development. For instance, "Education and Reform in China" by Hannum and Park (2007) highlights how new perception and role of education in society affect Chinese citizens in economic, ethnic and geographic perspectives. The curriculum changes and teaching reforms in different provinces of China were investigated in the book "Curriculum Reform in China" by Yin and Lee (2012). The recent book "Educational Development in Western China" (Lee et al., 2016) is a comprehensive research encompassing various critical issues from primary to tertiary education in western provinces of China, including extensive problems of quality and equity, educational policy, gender segregation in education, teacher training and others.

Internationalization process of higher education in China. The ambitious plan of the government to remodel the Chinese higher education system introducing the achievements and best practices of Western education has resulted in encouragement of the dynamic internationalization processes at Chinese HEIs. Overall, the national policy to align higher education with the foreign benchmarks and flagship universities of the Western world could be considered as China's pragmatic reaction to the pressure of the globalization of education and increasing competition on behalf of the international counterparts. The explanatory definition of internationalization by Knight (2008) could describe accurately the Chinese action as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education" (2008). In their publication "Internationalization of Chinese Higher Education" Neubauer and Zhang (2015) add that there is a particular element pertinent to China which constitutes in viewing internationalization as a "salvation movement" which can strengthen China and make the country more progressive and advantageous based on Western knowledge and technology.

Internationalize penetrates all aspects of university life, prompting changes in curricula, teaching methodology, research activities, university governance as well as mobility schemes. And again, as it is in the case of higher education development, the internationalize process differ from university to university and depends largely on such contextual factors as social culture, provincial higher education policy, scope of self-governance, geographical characteristics and individual institutional background (Yang, 2002). Universities involved in 211 and 985 projects and which receive more financial support from the government tend to show better achievements in the field of internationalization than their counterparts that are not in the list of recipients of the project benefits. Likewise, HEIs in the financially more stable provinces as East coast of China have more potential and resources to develop foreign relations and enhance their international reputation. Moreover, there is a distinction in internationalization priorities among Chinese universities in their mission and goals: all universities of 985 project present a strategic significance for their provinces and are supported to become world-class universities, while other HEIs might have a humbler scope focusing on regional and local needs. However, there is still the common strategy for all Chinese universities in terms of internationalization which is revealed in the desire to recruit foreign teachers and, in particular, English teachers since English is a dominant global language, and China has introduced it as the must throughout its education system. Consequently, nowadays great employment opportunities for expatriates turned China into the home for more English speakers than any other country in the world (Neubauer & Zhang, 2015). This fact proves that the English language has become a pervasive tool for Chinese higher education to integrate into the mainstream of the global education system. On the contrary, Li Lanqing, a former Deputy Prime Minister, emphasized that English teaching and learning in China has plentiful challenges as it is "really time-consuming and money-burning with low efficiency" (Liu Ziqian, 2014-05-23).

Chinese policy on foreign academics' recruitment for universities. Chinese Foreign Experts Bureau (FEB) is responsible for overall recruitment of foreign experts and academics willing to teach in China in different types of institutions from kindergartens to universities. Nevertheless, there are numerous agencies and institutions which deal with recruiting and administration of foreigners under the control of the FEB. The recruiting procedures and arrangements may vary depending on whether an individual is considered as a "foreign expert" or a "foreign teacher". The distinction between these two notions constitutes in qualifications of the applications as well as the source of funding for incoming academics.

Thus, a certain number of foreign expert positions are approved annually by the State Council of the People's Republic of China. The selection and nomination for a foreign expert position are carried out on a competitive basis, and the financial remuneration can be negotiable in accordance

with the reputation and expertise of scholars and professors. Funding for these positions is also provided by the State Council, i.e. the Chinese government, and include salary as well as such benefits in the form of covering expenses for travelling, accommodation, and medical insurance.

Foreign teachers are recruited directly by Chinese HEIs, local provincial departments or bureaus of education. Each year there are hundreds of available positions of university teachers in various disciplines in Chinese institutions of tertiary education. The most popular is the position of foreign language teachers with a considerable domination of English professors which is explained by the attempt to improve the nation's proficiency in English among undergraduates, postgraduates, and university instructors.

Through the State Council budget or their own finances 211 and 985 project universities tend to attract renowned academics who have relevant work experience in higher education sector, great potential in teaching and research, can contribute to the development of research culture and increase faculty research production. In contrast, ordinary universities (those which operate outside 211 and 985 projects) have fewer demands in hiring foreigners and may require the minimum in teaching or research experience. It is common for ordinary HEIs to recruit teachers with Bachelor's degree and little or no previous work experience which implies also less salary (in the case of language teachers, the lack of the official work experience may be replaced with a certificate of a language teacher qualification). Foreigners having Master's degree or doctorate may be qualified as "foreign experts" in a university and are allowed to conduct more advanced courses being paid much more than "foreign teachers".

Impact of foreign academics' recruitment on higher education in western China. The most conspicuous impact driven by the employment of foreign academics at HEIs in Western China is revealed in the change of organizational and learning cultures within universities. The acceptance of the variety of cultures brought by the foreigners entices innovations in teaching, curriculum and administrative processes. Western-educated foreign academics are expected to implement the student-centred approach in their teaching methodology, widely use interactive elements in their courses as well as introduce academic values commonly spread in Western world such as respect of intellectual property and the prohibition against plagiarism. The latter presents a challenge for Chinese students since their understanding of plagiarism and writing norms, shaped by their cultural and educational traditions, might be different from Western conceptions. Perhaps it is especially pertinent to the courses which use the foreign language as a medium of instruction since there is a tendency among Chinese student with limited communicative and writing competencies in a foreign language to violate norms for appropriate source use (Hu & Lei, 2015). For that reason, foreign academics should encourage academic socialization of their students raising their awareness on the standards of the academic writing, developing thus critical and independent thinking.

In western Chinese universities the ubiquitous practice is to provide a large freedom for foreign lecturers to design the content of the courses and determine the methodology to apply. On one hand, this practice is open to new ideas from international staff and welcomes innovation in terms of curricula development. On the other hand, the majority of universities in Western China are excluded from additional funding within 211 and 985 projects and have to restrict international staffing sometimes to inexperienced foreigners who have might need guidance in selecting instructional materials which correspond to the objectives of the programme in general and the students' background knowledge and skills. Moreover, there are often no formal indicators and procedures at institutional level to measure the quality of the teaching and the outcomes of the foreign academics. Further, it happens often that foreign teachers are focused only on fulfilling their teaching responsibilities without taking into account the option to develop their research potential and start publishing their own papers. Thus, the absence of the evaluation system may create an environment where international staff are demotivated to foster their professional growth, and consequently, shape the quality and development of the institution itself.

It might be argued that universities in Western China try just to fill vacant positions for international staff without considering their professional qualifications. It can be a reaction to the demands of the mass clientele wishing to see more foreign staff working at the universities, and inexperienced academics that are "less expensive" could reduce the costs for internationalization processes. Under these circumstances, the formality to correspond to the expectations of the national policy and stakeholders prevails over the requirements for quality of education provided by foreign staff. Determination of the validity of foreign academics' employment entails analysis of both economic perspectives of investment in foreign staff recruitment as well as the potential of local teachers in Western China. In the publication on the impact of overseas training on teachers' competencies, Li and Edwards (2013) argues that those Chinese academics who participated in an

overseas professional development programme absorbed the best practices of international education and successfully implemented them at their home institutions in Western China in terms of curriculum and methodology innovations. In this regard, HEIs might face a dilemma whether to invest in the recruitment of foreign academics or in sending their local teachers abroad to undertake professional development programmes since the latter could produce the same or even better outcomes than their international colleagues.

Depending on the objectives and needs of the universities in Western China, foreigners can be hired for research purposes as well to increase the position in the national or world ranking by running research projects and publishing papers in prestigious scientific journals. In this case, the criteria for recruiting are rather strict, and only academics with solid research experience may be approved for the position. The university will have to spend more finances on this kind of researchers, however, the cost is often justified by the deliverables created by these foreigners. But having highly qualified researchers on which the university places stake on in research achievements and rankings would be a cause for increasing competition with local academics, and ultimately, create possible tensions among foreign researchers and Chinese ones. The positive aspect of this situation is that competition might work as a motivating factor for local staff to produce more scientific papers or to publish them in more prestigious journals. At the same time, the cooperation among foreigners and Chinese researchers is suggested in the form of research teams and groups which can manage large-scale research projects and produce joint publications in highly ranked journals. Universities in Western China can benefit also in expanding network links in research cooperation at global level by hiring famous international faculty, and thus, the employment of foreigners will have a long-term impact on the overall institutional development.

The intercultural communication that Chinese students experience during the classes with foreign lecturers helps learners to overcome the language barrier and gain self-confidence. It is a common challenge for the majority of Chinese students to have low self-esteem when it comes to communication with foreigners. This obstacle can be eliminated only through the experience of listening and talking to foreign teachers, and the classroom environment should be encouraging and motivating for such students. Foreign academics should also know and understand the local cultural and social context of the Western China to identify the relevant teaching methods to deal with students (Wang, 2011). It especially refers to students with the disadvantaged background such as LBC which require special attention, teaching and psychological support to perform successfully and pursue their academic goals.

Rapid foreign staff turnover is another problem for universities in Western China as often academics with ambitious goals in professional development prefer to search a job position in East China. This preference of working on east coast is largely due to the negative image of the Western provinces which are seen as underdeveloped and backward. Nowadays China faces tremendous problems with internal brain drain when the talented graduates and workers from Western China move to the other side of the country seeking better career opportunities and future. The same can be referred to foreign lecturers who might work for one or two semesters at a university in Western China and then move to the East provinces.

Temporary employment situation of foreign staff inevitably shapes the organizational culture of the correspondent department or faculty and the university in general. It impedes the full integration of foreigners into academic community of a department and/or university as well as affects the student-teacher relationship. Studies assert that teachers employed for short-term contacts at HEIs are frequently less effective since they have little or no access to students' records which results in the lack of awareness on students' abilities and attainment levels as well as students' special educational needs (Office for Standards in Education, 2002).

Another interesting feature of human resource management in western Chinese universities is the tendency to recruit mainly lecturers from such countries as Canada, the USA, UK or Australia. HEIs believe that this a great leap forward to hire foreigners from developed countries and their nationality or country of origin becomes the main criteria for employment, neglecting sometimes their work experience, teaching or research qualifications. However, academics from less developed countries but with high-level degrees and relevant work experience are regarded as unsuitable for university development and reputation. Foreign teachers from undeveloped countries are often criticized due to their approach which might be different from Anglo-American ways of teaching that is seen as a benchmark and language proficiency which in the aggregate may jeopardize the standards of instruction in western Chinese universities. Even though there are cases when academics from backward countries produced numerous articles in the most prestigious journals worldwide whereas

their colleagues from developed countries experienced research stagnation (Hoque et al., 2010). It could be suggested that the issues of nationality, race or religion should not be the recruitment principle, but the focus has to be made on professional competencies and potential of academics to be hired.

Cultural and academic segregation constitutes a challenge for foreign teachers in western Chinese universities. For instance, foreign academics may not participate on a regular basis in department/faculty meetings which are compulsory for Chinese lecturers. The reason for such separation is usually due to the language barrier as these internal meetings tend to be held in Chinese. The same estrangement happens when cultural or sports events are organized by the university and all departments form their own groups for a parade, but foreigners are put in a separate group as a distinctive type of employees. Generally, it is dictated by the attempt of a university to promote itself among current or prospective students by showing its powerful internationalization achievements in the form of the employed foreigners. Nevertheless, these practices to isolate foreign academics from their affiliated university units endanger foreigners' employment relationship and their integration into the academic community of the institution. Therefore, the policy of coping with foreigner lecturers from administrative perspective should be also taken into account in order to fully engage foreigners into university initiatives as well as to develop positive institutional characteristics of HEIs in western China.

Conclusions. Western China has a range of peculiarities in terms of cultural, social and economic aspects which shape the higher education sector in the region. Low development status of the western provinces dictates certain patterns for the advancement of universities and their internationalization activities. Thus, the majority of HEIs in western China give a priority in employment for foreign teachers with little or no work experience in order to reduce costs since highly qualified and well-known professors from Oxbridge or Ivy Leagues universities require higher remuneration.

The impact of foreign academics' recruitment is multifaceted and depending on the university's objectives and goals might be reflected in curriculum innovation, upgraded teaching methodology, interactive learning process, intercultural communication outcomes, research achievements. Additionally, foreign teachers have to know the cultural and educational context of local Chinese students so that they can be aware and understand the needs and expectations of the learners and determine the best ways of conducting classes.

Certain challenges are associated with foreign teachers' employment in western China which is closely related to the entrenched cultural and economic traditions. Thus, the rapid turnover of foreign staff negatively affects the teaching process and form a special attitude to foreigners as temporary workers on behalf of students and local staff, which in its turn, might hamper the integration of foreign academics to the university community. The recruitment criteria for foreigners are questioned as sometimes they do not focus on the professional qualifications of foreign lecturers rather than on their country of origin. Finally, integration of foreigners into university should become a key concern for universities in western China since foreigners' segregation affects their satisfaction and attitude to the job, and consequently, their work performance.

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