

Vision and action: a case study of the impact of international collaborations in higher education on staff professional development in China

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Background

The internationalisation of higher education (HE) has been facilitated by joint statements to facilitate and strengthen extensive and high-level cooperation between countries (e.g., the Sino-UK Strategic Collaboration in HE Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) 2007-2009). This encourages UK institutions to actively establish joint collaboration and exchange initiatives with Chinese partner institutions (The Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA), 2006), whilst China also regards the collaborations as an important element to improve the quality of HE. One of the significant areas of co-operation identified by the MoU (2007-2009) is the quality assurance and enhancement of collaborative programmes and courses in HE. Within the MoU strategic framework, research projects have been commissioned (e.g., QAA, 2006, Higher Education Academy (HEA) 2008-2011) to evaluate the existing programmes so that implications can be drawn for sustainable development.

Research on professional development (PD) identifies issues in staff capacity building in HE (Murray, et al. 2009). As international and intercultural knowledge transfer in the tertiary sector enhances academic and research excellence (Courtney and Anderson, 2009), 'university academics are increasing mobile' (Kenway and Fahey, 2009: 555). In China, PD for academics is currently high on the Government's agenda (China's 11th Five Year Plan 2006-2011). The rapid social transformation and educational reform has led to the reconstruction of professional identity for academics in HE (Lu and Wang, 2009). PD models have thus diversified in structure, finance and content. There has been an increasing demand for university academics to develop international knowledge and skills through international collaboration (Li-Hua, 2007). However, there are distinct challenges in staff PD in terms of involving international collaborative programmes, which have varying impact on individual academics and institutions as well (Zhang, 2003; Zhuang, 2009; Adams and Song, 2009).

Research Questions

It is therefore critical to reflect on the nature of PD in HE in China and to acquire a better understanding of the potential impacts of international collaborations on academics. This paper outlines the results summarised from a small-scale case study project, a sub-project of the HEA commissioned project (2008-2011) on 'Strategic implications of international collaboration in HE'. By evaluating the PD models in relation to the international collaborations during 1999-2009 in a provincial-level university in China, this case study aims to investigate the impact of the programmes on PD motivation, capacity building, and institutional support mechanism from the perspectives of the academics involved. Strategic implications from the examples of best practice and warnings of pitfalls to avoid can provide insights into the different ways in which this agenda for change in PD plays out in different contexts.

Methods

The research is a flexible designed case study undertaken in ethnographic approach in a university in China established in the 1990s. Data were collected in a mixed-method of in-depth, semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, narrative enquiries, and document scrutiny. Two main cohorts were identified for participation from staff at administrative levels (N=10) and academics (N=26) who joined the programmes. The research examined the PD models implemented during 1999-2009 using 4 schools as cases. Action research was employed involving the chief author as the researcher and

active participant as well. Interviews were recorded with informed consent from the participants. Potential ethical issues were considered and relevant guidelines were followed.

Frame

PD is very important for academics' personal improvement and organizations' sustainable development. International collaboration for academics is a strategic choice to accelerate the pace of internationalisation in HE. Reviewing existing practices and compiling case study of different forms of collaborations provide guidance for any institution embarking on international activities. Institutional strategies and cross-cultural management have implications for the designing of schemes, reducing risks, and maximising benefits for all stakeholders concerned.

Research findings

The findings

This study reveals positive perspectives from the participants towards the international collaboration programmes, who regarded the programmes as channels for widening their visions of internationalisation, and for developing their capacity in learning and teaching in HE. Nevertheless, issues are identified in the design, evaluation and assessment of the programmes, the selection of the participants for PD, and the institutional support mechanism. Awareness and understanding of country and culture specific issues in relation to PD is perceived crucial for healthy and sustainable collaborative relationships between the partner institutions.

Contribution to knowledge

Based on the actual experiences, this study is hoped to provide an overview of the PD models in a Chinese university in relation to academic collaborations with international HE institutions. The evidence of the research, especially the issues and challenges identified are likely to be encountered by similar institutions. Therefore, the practice in the university can add knowledge to the limited body of literature on staff PD and international academic collaboration and provide better awareness and understanding for international universities in cooperation with China. Given the obvious limitations due to the sample size, the implications drawn can illuminate future institutional policies in terms of staff PD and the sustainable development in international collaboration in China and beyond.

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