

Overseas Education in China: Changing Landscape and Policies

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The 2009 Sino-US Joint Statement declared that the United States would encourage more Americans to study in China, by sending 100,000 students in the coming four years. It is mentioned in the joint statement that the United States sends students to China on a large scale. Compared with the then 20,000 US students in China, 100,000 would equal a breakthrough. Actually, there is a continuous increase in the number of students studying in China, and overseas education in China has attracted extensive attention.

RAPID DEVELOPMENT

China has become the major country that sends students abroad—178,900 students in 2008, followed by 229,300 students in 2009. Meanwhile, overseas education in China has developed rapidly, despite its smaller scale of sending

students abroad.

China has ranked among a few countries whose international students grew dramatically. Between 2001 and 2008, the average annual growth rate was over 20 percent, and the annual net growth reached 30,000. The year of 2008 laid a landmark, when international students first exceeded 200,000 and increased by 14.32 percent since the previous year. The number of international students in 2008 equaled 180 times of those in 1978 (1,200), 38 times of 1988 (5,835), and 5 times of 1998 (43,084).

Overseas education in China has become more diversified. International students enrolled in nonformal programs usually take Chinese-language training or short-term study, not in the purpose of earning a degree. The proportion of international students enrolled in formal programs has increased yearly, while the proportion enrolled in nonformal programs has reduced. In 2004, among all the 110,844 international students, the percentage of students in nonformal programs accounted for 71.5 percent but dropped to 64.2 percent in 2008, when the total number was 223,499; meanwhile, the proportion of students in formal programs increased from 28.5 percent in 2004 to 35.8 percent in 2008.

Institutions enrolling international students have also been increasing. There were 23 academic institutions with international students in 1979, 55 in 1984, above 330 in 1997, 363 in 2001, and 420 in 2004. In 2008, institutions' numbers grew to 592. Besides regular institutions of higher education, many research

institutes and other types of educational institutions admit international students, such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the China Civil Aviation Management Institute. Private institutions, such as Beijing Geely University, also enroll international students.

SIGNIFICANCE OF GROWTH

Overseas education helps China develop partnerships with other countries. From 1950 to 2000, China has trained more than 360,000 international students, who later became experts in science and technology, education, diplomacy, and administration of sending countries. Among students who studied in China, a few served as prime ministers, some worked in ministerial positions, hundreds were appointed professor or associate professor, and thousands of them were engaged in cultural, economic, and trade cooperation with China. Briefly, overseas education in China has contributed in developing and consolidating China's political, diplomatic, economic, and trade cooperation with the outside world, as well as conducting cultural, educational, and personnel exchanges.

Overseas education strengthens China's national soft power. International students become "bridges" to enhance friendship among people across countries. A majority of international students became professionals, promoting mutual understanding and friendship between Chinese and foreign youth. A large number of international students understand China well. Overseas education in

China has enhanced soft power through training international students who take positive attitudes toward China, disseminating Chinese language and culture, expanding the country's international influence, enhancing its image, and improving its management level, as well as other aspects.

Overseas education promotes constructing world-class universities. China's top universities are the main institutions recruiting international students. These students bring new and different ideas, activate the academic atmosphere, enrich cultural diversity, and expand internationalization of universities. Also, overseas education encourages China's universities to improve quality and enhance international reputation.

Overseas education also leads to economic gains. Based on the estimate of a task force of Peking University, long-term international students create a direct annual income in China of about US\$0.96 billion to US\$1.15 billion, while short-term students contribute US\$0.09 billion. The two types of students create a direct annual income in China of about US\$1.05 billion to US\$1.24 billion. Besides direct income, other spending includes transportation fee and rental charge, as well as consumption spurred by scholarships. Moreover, overseas education in China drives economic growth in some related sectors and creates job opportunities.

REMAINING PROBLEMS

Despite progresses and significance, however, there are problems in further development of overseas education in China. The academic level of overseas education is relatively low. In 2008, among the 80,005 international students in formal programs, undergraduate students accounted for 81.1 percent. Graduate students made up a comparatively low proportion, with only 6.4 percent in total international students. There is a major gap in the level between China and some developed countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France. For example, almost half of international students in the United States enroll in graduate education programs.

Regarding fields of study, a high proportion of international students major in humanities and social sciences—namely 80 percent. In 2008, international students studying Chinese language and literature accounted for 55.7 percent, followed by other majors such as Western medicine, economics, business, science, traditional Chinese medicine, and engineering. The largest number of such international students come from the main top-10 sending countries, 8 in Asia. Furthermore, international students in China mainly came from South Korea, the United States, Japan, India, and Vietnam.

China's current regulations and policies cannot adapt to development of overseas education. The Regulations on Higher Education Institutions Admitting International Students, issued in 2000, is quite outdated. Institutional autonomy

for recruiting international students is inadequate.

NEW POLICIES

For further development of overseas education in China, the government is implementing the following new policies.

The scale of international students will expand. According to the Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020), China will become the biggest hosting country in Asia and a major destination in the world for international students. Maintaining an annual growth rate of 7 percent, international students will reach 500,000 by 2020. The Chinese government and universities are taking efforts to create conditions for enhancing proportion of international students in campuses.

The scale and magnitude of government scholarship will be strengthened. China will build a scholarship framework, in which central government plays a major role, and expand scale and magnitude of scholarship, gradually. The government plans to skew scholarship—toward key universities, disciplines, and programs—and balance its distribution among sending countries. Local governments, higher education institutions, and enterprises are encouraged to establish various forms of scholarship.

A foundation program system will be established. China is perfecting the Chinese Language Proficiency Test (HSK) examination system, to improve

international students' Chinese-language ability before departure so that they will be better prepared for study in China. The government encourages universities that have language policies to use English, fully or in part, as a teaching medium to foreign students. China has constructed a program system for overseas undergraduate students, to guarantee them appropriate study requirements.

A favorable policy environment is emerging. The government was planning to amend Regulations on Higher Education Institutions Admitting International Students, to explicitly stipulate responsibilities, rights, and obligations of students and institutions. The Ministry of Education has been modifying and perfecting other policies, so as to normalize administration and education for international students, and ensure enrollment, visa application, study, graduation, and other steps that connect well.

The making and implementation of new policies cannot succeed without the initiative of universities that play as critical stakeholders of overseas education. In order to attract more qualified international students and improve quality of overseas education in China, the government and universities are working together to build a policy alliance.