

Characteristics and Leadership Development Needs of Chinese Higher Education Institution Leaders



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Abstract This chapter explored the characteristics and leadership development needs of Chinese HEI leaders. Data were collected from 1,000 pre-leadership development surveys and four post-leadership development interviews. The organisational, professional, and personal needs framework was applied in the data analysis. The findings show that the HEI leaders who received the overseas leadership development programmes were mostly male and held top leadership positions as vice chairmen, vice presidents and other equivalent positions. The Chinese government expected the HEI leaders to assimilate the learnt experience from the overseas leadership development programmes and apply it in China's educational reforms and development. The professional development needs of the HEIs leaders included learning advanced concepts of higher education governance and leadership. Their personal needs included learning about the history, economic development, and culture of the host countries and acquiring new knowledge and skills to respond to a rapidly changing world. This chapter helps us to understand the realities of the overseas leadership development programmes and potential improvements for future leadership development design.

Keywords Chinese HEI leaders · Characteristics · Leadership development needs

1 Introduction

China has the largest higher education (HE) system in the world. By 30th September 2021, there were 2,756 regular higher education institutions (HEIs) in mainland China, of which 1,608 were from the central and western regions of China.¹ There

¹ Central and western regions of China refer to 20 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous region. They include Shanxi, Henan, Anhui, Hubei, Jiangxi, Hunan, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Chongqing, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.

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are two types of regular HEIs in mainland China, with 1,270 HEIs offering degree programmes and 1,486 higher vocational colleges (Educational Statistics, 2021). The number of higher vocational colleges thus exceeds the number of HEIs offering degree programmes. In terms of geographic distribution, regular HEIs in the central and western regions of China account for 54% of those in the whole country. These HEIs undertake the responsibility for providing human resources, science and technology support for the economic and social development of China, especially in the central and western regions. The expansion of HEIs has met the demand for student enrolment and has made important contributions to the massification of HE in China. Nevertheless, compared with their counterparts in the eastern region, HEIs in the central and western regions are still disadvantaged by the lack of financial and human resources. Developing HE in the central and western regions of China is a top priority of the central and local governments.

As the top decision-maker in an HEI, the leadership of the president, to a large extent, determines the quality and status of the institution. In order to develop HE and the leadership capacities of regular HEI leaders in the central and western regions, the MoE (2012) launched a series of overseas leadership development programmes from 2012 to 2018. This chapter aims to investigate the characteristics and leadership development needs of the HEIs leaders who participated in the overseas leadership development programmes. Two research questions are answered in this chapter:

1. What are the characteristics of the Chinese HEI leaders who attended 2012–2018 overseas leadership development programmes?
2. What are the Chinese HEI leaders' leadership development needs?

To accurately map Chinese HEI leaders' leadership development needs, a three-stage needs analysis was conducted before, during, and after the overseas leadership development programmes. The need analysis examined participants' organisational, professional, personal and needs. Surveying participants' needs is a prerequisite for designing the leadership development content together with overseas leadership development providers. Collecting feedback during and after the leadership development helped the organisers and providers to assess and improve the leadership development quality (Yu, 2016). Hence, the three-stage needs analysis served multiple purposes in the overseas leadership development programmes.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *The Characteristics of the Learners*

The learners' characteristics can be analysed from two perspectives. The first perspective involves their demographic characteristics: Liu et al. (2017) divided the demographic characteristics of learners into five categories: physical characteristics, geographical characteristics, social characteristics, quality characteristics and

economic characteristics. These characteristics consist of 12 items: the physical characteristics include age and gender; the geographical characteristics include administrative region, residence and migration; the social characteristics include marriage, ethnicity and social class; the economic characteristics comprise income, occupation and industry; and the quality characteristics refer to cultural background (Liu et al., 2017). The second perspective looks into the learners' cognitive ability, self-efficacy, motivation and expectations for the leadership development (Rebecca & Eduardo, 2011). Jacques (2013) proposes another list of the learners' characteristics, including self-control, self-efficacy, organisational commitment, professional commitment and learning output.

In terms of the selection of the participants, the MoE set criteria in accord with the principle of 'fairness and openness'. The most important criteria were as follows: First, the candidate must be politically correct. Second, the candidate's work remit must be compatible with the programme theme. He or she must have been in charge of the specific work for more than six months prior to the leadership development. Third, the candidate should be no more than 50 years old. These criteria were set to ensure the participants would acquire knowledge and lead institutional changes after the leadership development.

This chapter first examined the participants' demographic characteristics (Liu et al., 2017), including personal characteristics (gender and age), geographical characteristics and socio-economic characteristics (occupation, leadership roles). I also categorised the participants according to the year they took part in the programmes and the type of HEIs they led in China.

2.2 Leadership Development Needs

A solid needs survey is a prerequisite for successful leadership development. Leadership development needs analysis is an investigation that, prior to the leadership development, determines whether the leadership development is needed, who needs it and what kind of leadership development is needed. Leadership development needs analysis is a prerequisite for determining leadership development objectives, designing leadership development content and implementing leadership development programmes (Zhao & Liang, 2010). Cong (2011) argues that the level of leadership development is determined by whether the leadership development implementation meets the needs of the participants and at what level the participants' needs are met. According to the *2018–2022 National Cadre Education and Training Plan (2018)*, leadership development needs can be divided into organisational needs and professional needs. Yu (2016) proposed a leadership development needs framework of 'organisational needs, professional needs and personal needs' for leaders. Organisational needs involve the understanding and implementation of educational laws, policies and regulations as formulated by the Chinese Communist Party and government. Professional needs refer to HEI leaders' strategic thinking, comprehensive

analysis, problem-solving skills, interpretation and comprehension of policy, emergency management, communication, coordination (Li, 2017). Personal needs refer to the leadership development content and methods meeting HEI leaders' cognitive styles (Yu, 2016).

3 Methods

The chapter employed mixed methods to investigate the characteristics and needs of the Chinese HEI leaders. Data were collected from pre-leadership development surveys and post-leadership development interviews. Data collection followed three steps: First, the NAEA distributed the leadership development needs questionnaire to the HEI leaders one month prior to their overseas leadership development. The leaders returned the completed questionnaire before the deadline. Second, the NAEA conducted interviews with the leaders right after completing the overseas leadership development. Third, the NAEA carried out post-leadership development visits to collect feedback from the leaders in their institutions. All these endeavours aimed to make the overseas leadership development more targeted and effective. From 2012 to 2018, the NAEA distributed 1,181 pre-leadership development surveys and received about 1,000 responses. The NAEA also conducted in-depth interviews with 100 participants. For the purposes of this chapter, the 1000 pre-leadership development surveys were utilised and four interviews were selected for the analysis.

3.1 Pre-leadership Development Survey

Prior to the overseas leadership development, the NAEA designed questionnaires to analyse participants' interests on the leadership development themes, such as university governance structure, university development, university human resources management, teacher development, higher education quality assurance, university development planning, resource allocation, the university serving local economic development, university teaching and talent training and the transformation and development of higher education. On the basis of these leadership development themes, the NAEA and overseas programme providers jointly developed leadership development plans and discussed the design of the leadership development content. This enabled the HEI leaders to have inquiry-based leadership and use the learned knowledge to improve their leadership work. The questionnaire survey comprised two types of questions, closed and open. The closed questions mainly utilised a Likert scale to rank the level of importance of leadership development themes from very important, to important and then unimportant. The topics included university governance structure and university development, university human resource management

Table 1 Profile of the participants

No.	Role	Country visited	Type of interview	Interview time	Coding
1	President	Finland	Individual interview	2016	P-1
2	President	The U.K	Individual interview	2016	P-2
3	Chairman	Australia	Group interview	2016	C-1
4	Vice president	The U.S	Group interview	2018	VP-1

and teacher development, higher education quality assurance, university development planning and resource allocation, university services for local economic development, university teaching and talent cultivation, higher education transformation and development, innovation and entrepreneurship education, university research and internationalisation, etc. The open-ended question was ‘What else would you like to include among your leadership development needs?’ If multiple HEIs were interested in a certain theme, the suggested theme was also included in the overseas leadership development programmes.

3.2 Post-leadership Development Interviews

After the programmes, the NAEA held eight seminars and conducted group and individual interviews with participants between 2014 and 2018. The post-leadership interview questions were designed to elicit an understanding of whether the participants’ expectations had been met, any areas of dissatisfaction and suggestions for future overseas leadership development. For the purposes of this chapter, I selected two group interviews and two individual interviews from four seminars held in 2016 and 2018 (see Table 1).

4 Findings

4.1 The Characteristics of HEI Leaders

The characteristics of the HEI leaders included the year of leadership development, their roles, gender, type of HEI they led, and the countries where they received their leadership development. From 2012 to 2018, a total of 1,452 HEIs leaders participated in 66 overseas leadership development programmes (see Table 2). In 2015, the number of participants reached 270, the highest number of the seven years. The reason for this was that 12 leadership development programmes were carried out in 2015. In 2012, the number of participants was 108, the lowest number with only

Table 2 Participants by year

Year	No. of participants
2012	108
2013	210
2014	230
2015	270
2016	191
2017	229
2018	214
Total	1,452

five leadership development programmes delivered. On average, 9–12 leadership development programmes were organised in the other years.

As to the roles of the participants, 337 were chairmen and presidents, accounting for 23.2% of all participants; 948 were vice chairmen, presidents and other equivalent positions, accounting for 65.3% of all participants; 35 were directors of academic affairs, accounting for 2.4% of participants; and the other 132 were MoE officials, accounting for 9% of the participants (see Table 3). It can be seen that the vice chairmen, presidents and other equivalent top leadership positions constituted the largest number of participants. In contrast, the directors of academic affairs possessed the smallest number of participants. The reason for this is that only two programmes for those leaders were organised in 2018, other programmes were designed for top level HEI leaders in other years.

The survey findings showed that 1,234 male leaders and 218 female leaders attended the overseas leadership development programmes respectively (see Table 4). The female leaders only accounted for 15% of the whole population. In some cohorts there was no or only one female leader. The imbalanced gender distribution was

Table 3 Participants by roles

Roles	No. of participants
Chairmen and presidents	337
Vice chairmen, vice presidents, and other equivalent positions	948
Directors of academic affairs	35
MoE officials	132
Total	1,452

Table 4 Participants by gender

Gender	No. of participants
Male	1,234
Female	218
Total	1,452

Table 5 Participants by type of regular HEIs

Type of regular HEIs	No. of participants
HEIs offering degree programmes	1,368
Higher vocational colleges	84
Total	1,452

Table 6 Participants by country

Country	No. of participants
Australia	268
Canada	195
Finland	46
Germany	225
Ireland	41
The Netherlands	19
The U.K.	233
The U.S.	425
Total	1,452

caused by two reasons. First, there were much fewer female leaders in Chinese HEIs compared to their male counterparts. Second, female leaders were offered fewer opportunities to attend overseas leadership development.

As to the type of HEIs from which the participants were selected, 1,452 participants came from regular HEIs. Only 84 were from higher vocational colleges (see Table 5). This suggests that the priority was given to develop regular HEIs rather than vocational colleges in the central and western regions of China, although the number of higher vocational colleges (1,486) was larger than the regular HEIs (1,270) in China.

Of the eight countries, the largest number of the Chinese HEI leaders attended leadership development in the U.S ($n = 425$, 29.3%), which was followed by Australia, U.K. and Canada (see Table 6). The smallest number of participants went to The Netherlands, with only 19 leaders, accounting for 1.3% of the whole population. This implies that there was a huge need to learn about HE models and practices in English-speaking countries.

4.2 Leadership Development Needs of HEI Leaders

4.2.1 Organisational Needs

Chinese HEI leaders' overseas leadership development served two purposes. First, it was expected to develop HEI leaders' knowledge of educational leadership and governance so that they could become change agents in their own HEIs in China.

Survey results revealed that the Chinese HEI leaders had a strong need in learning about the overseas HEI governance and quality assurance rather than acquiring an overview of different HE systems. Second, it was expected that the participants would compare educational values and practices in various countries and appreciate the Chinese way of leading and developing HE in the central and western regions.

The follow-up interviews further revealed Chinese HEI leaders' leadership development needs. As one leader said,

The leadership development needs of HEI leaders are changing. The focus of observation has changed from physical environment, such as the university infrastructure and experimental equipment, to strategic planning and discipline construction. It is very urgent to improve the daily operation and international competitiveness of the Chinese universities. (P-1, individual interview)

Overseas leadership development should be based on the needs of the nation, the province and the HEI. To promote the development of HEIs in the central and western regions of China, one cannot simply follow the practices of HEIs in the eastern region or copy the practices of foreign HEIs. According to China's education Gini coefficient, education inequality in the central and western regions of China is more substantial than that in the eastern and coastal regions. Furthermore, this inequality is mainly caused by within-group differences rather than between-group differences. In other words, within central and western regions, there is a huge gap between the relatively advanced and the comparatively backward provinces and cities in terms of higher education provision and quality (Yang et al., 2014). The higher education development pattern mirrors the economic development pattern in China. This implies that educational resources, financial aid and investment are powerful leverage to re-balance the unequal development in higher education. It also suggests that the internal diversity of higher education development needs within the central and western regions should not be overlooked when designing leadership development programmes for HEI leaders from these areas. There was a need to combine overseas leadership development with reform and development needs in China's HE, adopting strategies that were suitable for the realities of the HEIs from central and western regions of China.

4.2.2 Professional Needs

The interviewees concluded that the overseas leadership development experience effectively enriched their professional knowledge, developed their professional capabilities, shaped their leadership styles, and cultivated professionalism. The survey results showed that the Chinese HEI leaders wanted to learn advanced educational governance concepts, improve governance practices and develop a comprehensive understanding of running HEIs. More emphasis was put on developing leadership competences in leading HEIs' daily operation and governance. By contrast, the survey data from the 2015–2016 overseas leadership development programmes showed that the Chinese HEI leaders assigned less importance to learning about building external networks and relations.

HEIs leaders saw building leadership capacity as a key factor in ensuring the healthy development of HEIs. For example, the Chinese HEI leaders who attended the 2015–2016 overseas leadership development programmes put ‘leadership’ as the most important area for development. In the follow-up interview, one leader pointed out how the programme had improved his job skills:

First, the programme improved my awareness. I acquired new knowledge, new ideas, and new methods in the areas of governance philosophy, organisational culture, governance structure, faculty management, scientific research organisation, faculty development, security mechanism, etc. Second, the programme improved my work commitment. I have more enthusiasm to lead changes and innovations in my institute. (P-1, individual interview)

The leaders also said they needed to take responsibility for promoting internationalisation at their HEIs. The survey showed that a majority of participants took overseas leadership development as an opportunity for developing mutual understanding and partnership between Chinese HEIs and their foreign counterparts. One interviewee said,

An expert I met in the programme has become the instructor of my university. As I need to improve the internationalisation of the academics, I invited the expert to work with academics of my university and conduct research at the expert’s university in the U.K. (P-2, individual interview)

Both survey and interview data confirmed that the overseas leadership development programmes had satisfied the needs of the Chinese HEI leaders. Between 2012 and 2018, over 300 memorandums were signed between Chinese and foreign HEIs, and arising from these, about 40 HEIs have established close relationships involving cooperation.

From the interviews, the Chinese HEIs leaders expected to build a platform between HEIs in the central and western regions of China and foreign HEIs to strengthen long term collaboration. Doing so, more Chinese HEIs leaders can benefit from the leadership development and the knowledge acquired from the bilateral visits can be accumulated regionally.

4.2.3 Personal Needs

On the personal level, the participants underscored the need for updating knowledge and broadening horizons through overseas leadership development programmes. One interviewee said,

We did not only want to learn about foreign HEIs, but also to study the politics, economy, and culture of the host countries. Lacking such knowledge makes it difficult to meet our leadership development needs. It may also lead to improper copying of foreign HEIs’ practices, which will negatively impact the development of Chinese HE. (P-1, individual interview)

It is advisable that the Chinese programme organisers will equip participants with basic knowledge of the economy, politics and culture of the host countries prior to the training. This would make it easier for HEI leaders to process and understand

the information obtained during their overseas training. They need not only to see and hear how the foreign HEIs practices, but also to analyse the factors that affect their history, system, culture, and economy. This would help the HEI leaders form reasonable and systematic interpretations of the specific practices of foreign HEIs.

In addition, the Chinese HEI leaders expected to learn new knowledge and skills to respond to rapid changes in the world. Globalisation, digitisation, and artificial intelligence have brought more connections, changes, and unprecedented rates of development to HEIs. During the interviews, the HEIs leaders raised their demand for new knowledge and new skills through overseas leadership development. They hoped to improve their ability to respond to the new situation, to promote the reform of Chinese HE through internationalisation, and to lead innovation. One leader said in the interview,

According to the development trend of the world and the needs of society, leaders must constantly acquire new knowledge, become familiar with new fields, and broaden horizons through overseas leadership development. (C-1, group interview)

In addition, the survey showed that the leadership development needs of HEIs leaders are changing. In 2012, the leaders assigned more importance to educational issues. However, in 2018, the leaders paid greater attention to learning about the economy, industry, and culture of the host countries. One interviewee said,

In recent years, China has an unprecedented development, surpassing many developed countries in some fields. In terms of internationalisation, China has changed from 'passive internationalisation' to 'active internationalisation', from 'low-level internationalisation' to 'high-level internationalisation', and from 'partial internationalisation' to 'overall internationalisation'. Therefore, I think the leadership development needs of HEIs leaders must be changing over the years. (VP-1, group interview)

5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the characteristics and leadership development needs of HEI leaders in overseas leadership development programmes. A majority of the HEI leaders held leadership positions such as vice chairmen, presidents and other equivalent top level leadership positions. A vast majority of participants were male leaders. English-speaking countries such as the U.S., Australia, the U.K., and Canada were the most visited countries. 94.2% of the participants come from HEIs offering degree programmes.

The findings have several implications. First, China is preparing future HEIs leaders through overseas leadership development programmes. Some of those vice chairmen and vice presidents will advance their career (i.e. becoming chairmen or presidents) and become key change agents in the central and western regions of China. Second, the current HEI leadership teams are dominated by male leaders. There is a strong need to include more female leaders in leadership pipeline and in development programmes. Third, most leadership development opportunities were given to HEIs

that have an academic focus, namely HEIs offering degree programmes. There is a strong need to develop the capacity of leaders from the higher vocational colleges in future. Lastly, besides the prestigious universities in English-speaking countries, other countries also have outstanding HE systems and HEIs that can provide high-quality overseas leadership development programmes to Chinese HEI leaders. Diversifying overseas leadership development programme providers can greatly enrich the programme content and better serve participants' diverse needs.

In conclusion, accurate and comprehensive research on leadership development needs is the foundation for high-quality leadership development programmes. It is clear that leadership development needs analysis effectively enabled the Chinese HEI leaders to learn new theories, leadership strategies and methods from the developed countries. From the overseas leadership development programmes, they expanded horizons, improved their strategic thinking and capabilities to develop the Chinese HE system and their own HEIs. The leadership development needs of HEI leaders have practical implications for the planning of high-quality overseas leadership development programmes. First, the organisers should design the programme schedule more carefully so that both knowledge and skill training are combined. Second, the HEIs leaders should devote themselves earnestly to the overseas leadership development. These endeavors will enhance the quality of overseas leadership development programmes.

Acknowledgements The author expresses his sincere thanks to Meng Tian and Xin Xing for their tremendous comments and help on this chapter. Without their professional tutoring on academic writing, this chapter would not be possible.

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