

Neoliberalism, Consumerism and Internationalisation: Chinese Higher Education Institution Leaders Attending the U.K. Leadership Development Programmes



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Abstract This chapter examines the impact of the overseas leadership development programmes delivered in the U.K. From 2012 to 2018, 233 Chinese HEI leaders visited 24 HEIs and organisations in the U.K. As one of the most popular destinations for degree education and international benchmarking, British HEIs subscribe to the ideologies of neoliberalism, consumerism and internationalisation. By visiting a wide range of British HEIs, the Chinese HEI leaders compared and contrasted two higher education systems and their underpinning values. Some best practices were adopted and adapted to serve Chinese HEI leaders' professional development and their institutional needs. Some institutional-level changes were implemented after the programme, while some contextual differences were reflected upon by the participants.

Keywords Chinese HEI leaders · Neoliberalism · Consumerism · Internationalisation · U.K. · China

1 Introduction

The U.K. higher education system has a reputation for its high quality and standards. With a number of world-renowned universities that occupying the top tier of many international league tables, such as QS, Times Higher Education (THE), and Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the U.K. attracts international visitors to learn about U.K. universities' teaching, research, and quality assurance criteria. Between 2012 and 2018, the Chinese MoE sent 233 Chinese HEI leaders to attend leadership development programmes in the U.K. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the programme impact on these Chinese HEI leaders' professional development and how they designed and implemented organisational changes in their own institutions after attending the leadership development programmes in the U.K. This chapter also discusses the contextual differences between the British and

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Chinese higher education systems. These differences explain why certain best practices in the British HEIs cannot be directly applied to the Chinese higher education context.

This chapter consists of four parts. It starts with a brief literature review of the higher education system in the U.K. and its main features. The methodology section introduces the data collected and analysed for this chapter, including seven individual interviews, three learning reports and eight internal publications written by the participants who disseminated learning outcomes after their visits to the U.K. The findings section synthesises the programme impact on these Chinese HEI leaders' professional development and the subsequent institutional level changes they have designed and implemented. The findings also explain why certain change initiatives could not be materialised in these Chinese HEIs. The discussion section further probes into the effectiveness of the leadership development programmes.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Higher Education Degree Programmes in the U.K.*

Unlike China and the U.S., the U.K. higher education system differentiates between universities and colleges. Colleges, in the British context, are further education institutions that prepare students for higher education, while universities are higher education institutions licenced to organise degree programmes and issue degrees to students. British HEIs provide a wide range of degree and diploma programmes, such as postgraduate research programmes leading to a doctorate (i.e. Ph.D.), postgraduate taught programmes leading to a master's degree, postgraduate diplomas, postgraduate certificates of education (PGCE), postgraduate professional degrees (e.g. Educational Doctorate), undergraduate programmes leading to bachelor's degree (i.e. honours, ordinary, enhanced, and intercalated first degrees), and undergraduate programmes leading to teacher qualifications (Study in UK, 2013). Undergraduate degree programmes usually last for three to four years with the third year in a placement. Postgraduate taught programmes leading to a master's degree are typically one year, while some can be extended to two years if more research elements are involved. Doctorate-level postgraduate research degree programmes normally extend over three years, or longer if the students are part-timers.

2.2 Popular Destination for International Students and Visitors

Following the U.S., the U.K. is the second most popular destination for both international students and academic visitors. In the academic year 2018/2019, 485,645 international students were pursuing higher education degrees in the U.K., accounting for over one-fifth of the whole student population (Study in UK, 2020). Over the past two decades, the number of international students has been steadily increasing. Statistics also show that international students tend to choose high-ranking universities (e.g., UCL, University of Manchester, University of Edinburgh, University of Oxford and University of Cambridge) located in major cities (e.g., London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow and York) in the U.K. The most popular subjects chosen by international students include business and administration, social studies, medicine, as well as creative arts (Study in UK, 2020).

It is not surprising that the list of U.K. universities with the most international students mirrors the international league tables. According to the QS World University Rankings 2020, 18 out of the top 100 universities are based in the U.K (QS, 2020). The Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings identifies 29 U.K.-based universities among the top 100 (THE, 2020). These rankings, to some extent, reflect British HEIs' quality of teaching and research as well as their graduates' employment prospects.

In addition to attracting international students who pursue a degree, British HEIs are also popular destinations for other HEI leaders to benchmark best practices for teaching, research and higher education governance and management. Benchmarking in higher education can be done in a systemic way. This entails academic visitors and HEI leaders reviewing and choosing a sample of universities as exemplars, learning about their academic and non-academic activities, examining their organisational structures, resources, and external networks, and assessing their impact on students, staff and the society at large. Based on these reviews, the benchmarkers evaluate their own resources, timelines and organisational goals to launch a systemic or partial change in their own institutions (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2011).

In addition to systemic benchmarking, international HEI leaders can also learn from British HEIs' experience and practices through short-term leadership development programmes such as the programmes we are reviewing in this book. These programmes normally provide one to three-week residential leadership development for international HEI leaders to observe British HEIs' best practices and have in-depth conversations with their counterparts in the U.K. The goal of these leadership development programmes is for participants to assess the readiness and feasibility of implementing changes in their own HEIs.

2.3 Marketisation and Students as Consumers

In the U.K., since the introduction of tuition fees in higher education in the late 1990s, seeing students as consumers has been widely adopted as an underlying principle for universities' daily operation (Bunce et al., 2017). Seeing students as consumers is tightly coupled with the neoliberal ideal of marketisation, which demands universities to deliver competitive services, employability and consumer satisfaction (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2015). In 2010, the Browne Review entitled U.K. universities to triple their annual tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 (Bunce et al., 2017). Correspondingly, the Consumer Rights Act (2015) holds universities accountable for students' rights and satisfaction as consumers. These changes created a new power relationship between universities and their student consumers (Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2014).

Under fierce financial pressure, British HEIs have started to use marketing and branding strategies to attract more resources and students (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Woodson, 2013). In addition to establishing a quasi-market for higher education within the U.K., higher education marketisation and student consumerism also aim to enhance the U.K.'s competitiveness in the global market by attracting international students and disseminating economically productive knowledge that leads to students' better employability and mobility (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). As neoliberalism has tightened its grip on HEIs in many countries, benchmarking British HEIs' successful stories of elevating their international rankings and satisfying their consumers has become one of the key goals of international visitors.

2.4 HEI Quality Yardsticks: Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)

To help consumers, including both domestic and international students, to make decisions on study programmes, various league tables are used to categorise universities in the U.K. For example, the National Student Survey (NSS) draws on students' feedback on the learning content they receive and elicits students' ideas for university's future improvement. REF and TEF were introduced in 2014 and 2017 respectively, by the government of England to recognise and encourage excellence in research and teaching performance. By opting into REF and TEF, universities' performances are assessed and recognised by a Gold, Silver, or Bronze award, indicating different levels of excellence.

In addition to signposting for consumers, REF and TEF also serve as reputational yardsticks to guide the government's resource distribution and the universities' tuition fees. For example, universities that have demonstrated high research outputs, research impact and good research environments in REF tend to receive more funding and greater prestige. TEF awards are given to universities that generate excellent teaching and high numbers of graduates. According to the Universities and Colleges

Admissions Service (UCAS) (2020), publicly-funded universities with a TEF award may charge a higher tuition fee than those that opt out of TEF. Learning about quality assurance tools, such as REF and TEF, is another key area for international benchmarking.

To sum up, the U.K. aims to establish a globally reputed higher education system that attracts both domestic and international students. To achieve this goal, the U.K. government launched a series of neoliberal educational policies to encourage marketisation and student consumerism. U.K. HEIs are subject to assessment frameworks such as REF and TEF that measure research and teaching outputs and quality. Due to many U.K. HEIs' long histories and outstanding academic performance, over a dozen universities are occupying the top tiers of several international higher education league tables. All these indicators make U.K. HEIs popular destinations for overseas students, academic visitors and HEI leaders. Against this background, the MoE sent Chinese HEI leaders to attend leadership development programmes in the U.K.

3 Methodology

This chapter focuses on the impact of leadership development programmes delivered by U.K. HEIs and organisations. The reason for choosing the U.K. as a case study is that the country has participated in the programmes over the seven years. From 2012 to 2018, a total of 233 Chinese HEI leaders attended leadership development programmes provided by 24 U.K. HEIs and organisations. The programme themes consisted of: (1) Quality assurance of higher education, (2) University research and education for innovation and entrepreneurship, and (3) Developing first-class universities and first-class disciplines. In this chapter, I focus on the programmes with themes 1 and 2. By analysing the participants' reflections on the programmes and their post-leadership development work, I probe into the impact of the overseas leadership development programmes on the individual leaders and the HEIs they lead in China.

The dataset for this chapter comprises seven individual interviews, three learning reports and eight university internal publications. A semi-structured interview guide was designed for the data collection. The interview questions included: *How does the U.K. leadership development programmes impact Chinese HEI leaders' professional development? What kinds of changes have been designed and implemented by the Chinese HEI leaders as the result of their overseas leadership development? What socio-cultural factors hinder the educational changes?*

Each interview lasted for 45–60 min. Six out of the seven interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with written permissions from the interviewees (Table 1). One interviewee did not want to have the interview audio recorded but was willing to participate in the research project. Interview notes were taken by the researcher for data analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted on all the interviews, learning

Table 1 Profile of the participants, data and coding (U.K. programmes)

No	Role	Main responsibilities	Programme theme	Programme time	Interview	Learning report	Coding
1	Vice president	Teaching	Quality assurance of higher education	2012	Yes	N/A	VP-7
2	Vice president	Teaching		2013	Yes	N/A	VP-8
3	Vice president	Teaching		2014	Yes	N/A	VP-9
4	Chairman	Communist Party Branch leader		2015	Yes	Yes	C-3
5	Vice president	Research infrastructure	University research and education for innovation and entrepreneurship	2016	Yes	Yes	VP-10
6	Vice chairman	Students' affairs		2016	Yes	Yes	VC-2
7	Vice president	Teaching		2018	Yes	N/A	VP-11

Note The role refers to the role held at the time of interviewing

reports, and publications. All the participants were anonymised during the data analysis process. The Findings section presents on the five themes.

4 Findings

Compared to their counterparts in the resource-rich eastern and coastal regions of China, HEI leaders from the central and western regions tend to receive fewer opportunities for overseas leadership development. In their interviews and learning reports, several participants highlighted that the leadership development programmes in the U.K. were one of the few bespoke programmes for higher education development in the resource-poor regions.

In terms of their leadership responsibilities, the seven Chinese HEI leaders interviewed can be divided into two groups: one group led student management work and the other group took charge of teaching and research development. The two leadership development themes provided by the British HEIs were *Higher education quality assurance* and *University-based research innovation and entrepreneurship*. The interviewees found the programme themes well aligned with their leadership roles and the HEI visions. Their visits to the U.K. have exerted the following impact on their leadership work and institutions.

4.1 Keys to Success: Teacher Professionalism, Critical Thinking and Organisational Culture

When describing the key lessons they have learned from the leadership development programmes, the interviewees highlighted U.K. higher education teachers' professionalism and job commitment. Small details, such as them being 'approachable and friendly,' 'always on time' and 'extremely responsive to queries,' were repeatedly noted in the interviews and learning reports. Some Chinese HEI leaders drew a connection between U.K. higher education teachers' professionalism and their professional autonomy. One interviewee commented:

You can tell that they (U.K. higher education teachers) are not overwhelmed by the pressure of advancing their professional titles. They do research and teaching out of passion, not just for the sake of keeping their jobs. (VP-8)

Compared to disseminating textbook knowledge, the Chinese HEI leaders observed that U.K. higher education teachers placed much emphasis on developing students' critical thinking skills. One interviewee noted:

I often wondered how teachers in U.K. universities ignited students' learning enthusiasm. Now I understand that students need space and time to immerse themselves in a learning culture. Even though the students do not walk away with a lot of textbook knowledge, they have mastered the communication skills and a strong desire for learning. (VP-7)

One interviewee summarised three ways of leading professionals in HEIs; these were leading with leaders, leading with rules, and leading with culture. Solely relying on leaders and rules tend to erode teachers' and students' intrinsic motivation because they become passive recipients of orders and demands. He further explained:

The ultimate art of leadership is leading with culture. There must be some teacher appraisal systems in British HEIs. However, the academic culture is an internal mechanism that cultivates teachers' job commitment. (VP-9)

Other interviewees also underlined that the leadership development programmes had exerted a direct impact on their understanding of organisational culture.

It is the culture of being rigorous and responsible that touched me the most. I have observed how they (U.K. university teachers) taught Ph.D. students. The focus is always on making a unique contribution to the field rather than following the supervisor's research plan. (VP-8)

The interviewees also acknowledged that it normally took decades to cultivate an academic and learning culture in HEIs. Most of the British HEIs they visited were prestigious universities with a long history and an enviable reputation. These top universities easily attract most competent students and teachers from all over the world. It is not easy for Chinese HEI in the central and western regions to gain comparable reputational, human and financial resources in a short period of time. The interviewees found that one U.K. university that had a comparatively shorter history and an explicit vision on collaborating with local industries and communities was more relatable to the HEIs they led in China. Key lessons they learned from

that U.K. university included how to effectively attract local students, how to design and deliver degree programmes to serve regional economic development and how to motivate teachers to innovate in their pedagogies.

4.2 Re-configuring the Relationship Between HEIs and Society

Another theme discerned by the Chinese HEI leaders is that their understanding of the relationship between HEIs and society had broadened. Several interviewees highlighted the different positionings of higher education in the Chinese and U.K. contexts. In China, higher education is often seen as a continuation of primary and secondary education. Chinese students are used to memorising textbook knowledge and studying for tests in universities. Learning is more structured and passive. By contrast, U.K. HEIs focus more on preparing students for the job market and society. More emphasis is put on developing students' social skills and critical thinking skills.

There is a strong culture of reading on campus. Teachers are not just teaching one textbook every semester. Students acquire a very broad spectrum of knowledge through reading. This is something we need to develop in my institution. (VC-2)

Furthermore, the interviewees noticed that the different campus layout reflected different relationships between HEIs and society in China and the U.K.

The universities we visited in the U.K. do not have high walls to isolate the campus from the external world. If students want to play football or baseball, they play with other teams in the local community. In China, our university students are isolated from society. Everything takes place on campus. Our students have better facilities to do sports, but it feels like being on an isolated island. (VC-2)

After returning from the overseas leadership development programme, one interviewee made a change in his university to move male and female student dormitories into one building. In his interview, he recalled Chinese students' and other HEI leaders' strong resistance to his change initiative.

I often wonder why we have to have separate male and female student dormitories in Chinese universities. In society, there are no male or female hotels. We should give students opportunities to adapt to society and learn how to resolve conflicts when living with mixed genders. It took me a few years to implement that change. Now our male and female students live in one building but on different floors. It has been a bumpy journey because some of our teachers are overprotective and conservative. Some students complained about hygiene, privacy, and safety issues. I think this is one important lesson for all our students to learn. They should learn to be more tolerant and adaptive in the society. (VC-2)

When facing change resistance within their HEIs, the Chinese HEI leaders relied on support from the university top leaders and other colleagues who shared similar visions and values. The interviewees discovered that two Chinese HEIs that had sent several top leaders to overseas leadership development programmes appeared to have

greater readiness and willingness for a systemic change. Leading institutional-level changes requires a critical mass of people to undertake change initiatives and stick to the change process, especially top-level leaders.

The Chinese HEI leaders also underlined the importance of institutionalising changes. If the change initiators stay in the same leadership positions for a number of years, they are more likely to see through the change implementation and institutionalisation process. However, this has not been the case for some HEI leaders who participated in the leadership development programmes. Three out of the seven interviewees had changed their leadership roles or responsibilities after their visits to the U.K. According to them, not having sufficient resources and time to implement a full cycle of reform in their HEIs had, to some extent, weakened the programme impact.

4.3 Strengthening Teaching Collaboration with External Partners

Another change initiated by the Chinese HEI leaders after their visits to the U.K. was promoting teaching collaboration with external partners. Two interviewees had planned to invite speakers from local companies to give lectures in their universities.

Knowledge comes from practice. If we have a Ph.D. graduate to teach entrepreneurship, it is not as convincing as having an entrepreneur who possesses hands-on experience. We had some start-up entrepreneurs to teach in our programmes this year. However, most companies or industries we visited did not accept our invitations. (VP-9)

Echoing VP-9's experience, VP-7 underlined the importance of using government policies to enable university-industry collaboration. In the province where the Chinese HEI is located, the provincial government established a *First-class University League Table*. Establishing meaningful university-industry collaboration was one of the key goals for the university to achieve.

To be recognised as a first-class provincial level university, we have built a university-wide student internship. Our trainee teachers spend one month in local schools as part of their teacher training. We have invited secondary school teachers to mentor our trainee teachers at the university. We also established a software lab in collaboration with local companies. Software engineers have been invited to guide students on campus. In return, we send students to their companies for internship. (VP-7)

Educational policies and the university's prestigious status were seen as useful resources for HEI leaders to persuade local companies and industries to join forces with them. The Chinese HEI leaders found that some U.K. universities of applied sciences (formerly known as polytechnics or technological universities) had more direct collaboration with industries and shared visions and missions similar to their own. Learning about how these U.K. universities established networks with local communities and industries was deemed valuable by the Chinese HEI leaders.

4.4 Promoting the Internationalisation of HEIs

The fourth change implemented by Chinese HEI leaders was promoting the internationalisation of their institutions. The interviewees were impressed by the degree of internationalisation of the British HEIs they visited. Their REF and TEF rankings were useful signposts guiding international students' and parents' choices and attracting international staff. VP-11 introduced an education export system into his own institution as a Chinese adaptation of internationalisation.

From the leadership development, I learned that the internationalisation of higher education leads to a community of shared future. At our university, we have established four Confucius Institutes in Sri Lanka, Rwanda, the US, and the UK. Now we are soon opening the fifth one in Papua New Guinea. This means our university has Confucius Institutes on five continents. (VP-11)

Higher education-related exports and transnational education were perceived positively by all the Chinese HEI leaders in their interviews. Having a large number of international students, mobility programmes, joint degree programmes, and international research projects are indicators of high-performing HEIs in China, although the national and local level education authorities have strict regulations on which overseas HEIs are eligible for international collaboration. VP-11 used the overseas leadership development opportunity to kick-start a joint degree programme with one programme provider in the U.K.

We visited University X during the leadership development programme. Their Vice Chancellor recently paid a visit to China. We are now further exploring the possibility of establishing a 3+1+1 joint degree programme. (VP-11)

All the interviewees preferred residential leadership development programmes in the U.K. over the more cost-effective online programmes for the reasons of having a more immersive learning experience and better face-to-face networking opportunities. Besides the formal leadership development, informal networking was an indispensable part of the experience. Campus tours, social events, group lunches, and corridor conversations were the places where informal learning and networking took place. More than half of the interviewees reported having continuing discussions with the U.K. HEIs after completing the leadership development programmes. They deemed attending overseas leadership development programmes one of the most effective ways to establish trusting partnerships with international collaborators.

5 Contextual Differences in International Benchmarking

In addition to the above-mentioned changes implemented by the Chinese HEI leaders as the result of their leadership development in the U.K., they also mentioned some contextual differences that hindered international benchmarking.

5.1 Providing Individualised Pastoral Support via a Personal Academic Tutor System

The most frequently praised practice was the individualised student support system in the U.K. HEIs. However, due to the lack of human and financial resources in the western and central regions of China, it was difficult to design a similar personal academic tutor system in the Chinese HEIs.

I found the personal academic tutor system impressive. Every tutor supervises 2–4 students and meets with them every week. Students share their learning and everyday life experiences with their tutor. The tutor listens to them and points students to certain student service providers if they need help. I think this strong tutor-tutee relationship can provide students with individualised support. But at the moment, we do not have the resources to build a similar system here. (VP-8)

Different teacher-student ratios were another reason that prevented Chinese HEI teachers from providing individualised pastoral care to the students.

Compared to the small-sized classes (in U.K. HEIs), our teachers have 50–60 students in a classroom. It is nearly impossible to provide that much individualised guidance. (VP-10)

5.2 Providing Individualised Academic Guidance via a Supervisor System

In addition to the lack of resources for individualised pastoral care, some interviewees underscored the different practices involved in the provision of academic guidance to Ph.D. students in the U.K. and China. Here, the differences mainly manifested in the supervisor-Ph.D. student relationship and expectations.

In the U.K. HEIs, Ph.D. students have to independently design and conduct their research projects. The role of the supervisor is to ensure that Ph.D. students conduct rigorous and ethical research. There is less emphasis and pressure on how many papers a Ph.D. student has to publish in core journals in the U.K. (VP-8)

By contrast, both Chinese university teachers and students are under huge pressure to publish papers in high-impact scientific journals as part of their career progression and Ph.D. studies. Although publishing research outputs in peer-reviewed journals is a relatively objective and effective way to assess a scholar's research achievement, this publish or perish culture tends to add stress to students' natural learning curves and weaken the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

Another interviewee observed the difference between process-based and results-based quality control for Ph.D. theses.

To conduct a Ph.D. thesis in the U.K., the student has to go through several checkpoints. The supervisor is heavily involved in each step. After receiving feedback from the supervisor, the Ph.D. student has to correct mistakes. It is not easy to obtain a degree from U.K. HEIs. It is hard to articulate my observations, but I found this is a very good system because it gives Ph.D. students the autonomy but also controls the quality they deliver. (VP-10)

According to the interviewees, some quality control and assurance measures have been established in the Chinese HEIs, but there is a strong emphasis on outputs, such as conducting random checks and blind reviews of master's and Ph.D. theses to detect plagiarism, ghost-writing, and other forms of academic misconduct.

5.3 Consumerism-Oriented Student Leadership

The last contextual difference detected by the Chinese HEI leaders is the role of the students in the HEIs in the two countries. Student unions as well as other student-organised societies form a strong foundation for student leadership in the U.K. This is coupled with the TEF, NSS and other student satisfaction assessments. Making students satisfied has been a pronounced value underpinning the higher education system in the U.K. One interviewee commented:

There is a national level service taking care of students' complaints and satisfaction. The purpose is to provide the best possible service to the students. In addition, the TEF is an effective tool to assess teachers and universities. (C-3)

Consumerism was perceived positively by the Chinese HEI leaders in the interviews, as it appeared to give more agency to the students and held universities accountable for the teaching quality. Currently, according to the interviewees, students in Chinese HEIs remain passive recipients of HEI leaders' and teachers' leadership. Student representatives participate in certain decision-making processes and lead some student activities. However, the concept of students as consumers is not rooted in the Chinese higher education system. Chinese HEIs are perceived as knowledge factories rather than service providers.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

There are two agendas guiding the development of higher education system in China: one is establishing world-class universities, and the other is bridging the quality gap between eastern and central-western regions. This chapter examines the impact of the overseas leadership development programmes provided by U.K. HEIs and organisations. These programmes were designed to serve the second agenda, which is enhancing higher education equality and HEI leaders' professional development in the less affluent regions.

International benchmarking has been used as a strategy to achieve this goal. From 2012 to 2018, more resources were given to HEIs in the central and western regions. As with any other transnational policy and practice benchmarking, it was widely acknowledged by the programme organisers, providers and HEI leaders that the best practices demonstrated by British HEIs should not be taken at face value. The follow-up research conducted has enabled us to identify the training impact on both

individual and institutional levels. Illustrated by the findings presented above, some of the lessons learned have been translated into institutional-level changes, while some observations enabled HEI leaders to reflect on the contextual differences between the two countries. Below, I will discuss the findings in relation to the bigger picture of Chinese higher education development and internationalisation.

First, the Chinese government has set the following five key points for HEI development: 'improving the qualifications of academics, cultivating students to be innovative, enhancing research, inheriting Chinese culture, and encouraging technological transfer' (Song, 2018, p. 734). Correspondingly, the leadership development programme themes and content designed by the U.K. programme providers covered four out of the five areas, with the exception of the inheriting Chinese culture element. According to the interviews and learning reports, the Chinese HEI leaders believed that various university league tables as well as the TEF and REF awards had enhanced British HEIs' prestige and international attractiveness. Aiming for higher rankings in global university league tables seems to be a shared goal by most Chinese HEIs and their overseas counterparts (Deem et al., 2008). Although many scholars are critical of the obsession with higher education rankings, it is hard to deny that highly ranked HEIs tend to gain more reputational, financial, and human resources. Especially in the under-resourced central and western regions of China, leaders are under huge pressure to make their institutions more entrepreneurial and innovative. Gaining external recognitions in league tables might be a useful tool to attract these resources.

Second, student consumerism is perceived positively by Chinese HEI leaders as a strategy for quality enhancement. Several interviewees mentioned two major challenges faced by HEI leaders in China: the lack of student agency and low teacher morale. It was believed that by giving students more choices and opportunities to give feedback, teaching quality and student services could be improved in Chinese HEIs. Researchers who study student consumerism in the U.K. context warn the potential harm of using transactional relationships to enhance student experience (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Pathan et al., 2017). They argue that this approach may force university teachers to satisfy students' needs by giving them desirable marks and force universities to invest more in the physical environment and materiality rather than in the pedagogical culture (Raaper, 2020; Tomlinson, 2017). These critiques were not mentioned by the Chinese HEI leaders in their interviews or learning reports. Instead, they underlined the individualised pastoral service, rigorous academic guidance, and powerful student unions as future development directions for their HEIs although they were currently under-resourced in their regions.

Lastly, institutional changes were implemented by combining international benchmarking with Chinese characteristics. Several Chinese HEI leaders have designed and implemented changes as a result of their leadership development in the U.K., including relocating the male and female dormitories, collaborating with local enterprises, and establishing overseas Confucius Institutes. It is worth noting that these changes were not merely a 'copy and paste' of U.K. practices. They reflected some fundamental aspects of Chinese culture, such as the division of genders in HEIs and the separation between HEIs and society. Collaboration with industry and business

sector has been a goal for many Chinese HEIs, although most HEI leaders acknowledge that bridging the gap between universities and society requires re-structuring and re-culturing their institutions (Mok, 2013). Leading with culture is deemed a more powerful tool compared to leading with leaders and rules. Visiting U.K. universities seem to have inspired these Chinese HEI leaders who later explored possibilities to invite successful entrepreneurs to their HEIs and send students to start-up companies.

Exporting Chinese culture to other countries via Confucius Institutes is a powerful way to demonstrate China's global competitiveness. This also implies that international benchmarking is not a one-way street. HEIs in the central and western regions have much potential to develop bilateral collaborations with overseas HEIs. The overseas leadership development programmes have facilitated the establishment of such partnerships, and this was deemed a strong impact by the Chinese HEI leaders.

To sum up, this chapter reviewed and examined the overseas leadership development programmes provided by U.K. HEIs and organisations between 2012 and 2018. The Chinese HEI leaders visited a wide range of HEIs in the U.K., from the top universities in international league tables to newer universities of applied sciences that collaborate closely with local business. All the Chinese HEI leaders interviewed had found the residential leadership development programmes in the U.K. impactful. At the individual level, all of them had acquired a deeper understanding of the higher education systems in the two countries. At the institutional level, some changes had been designed and implemented by merging the best practices from the U.K. with Chinese characteristics.

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