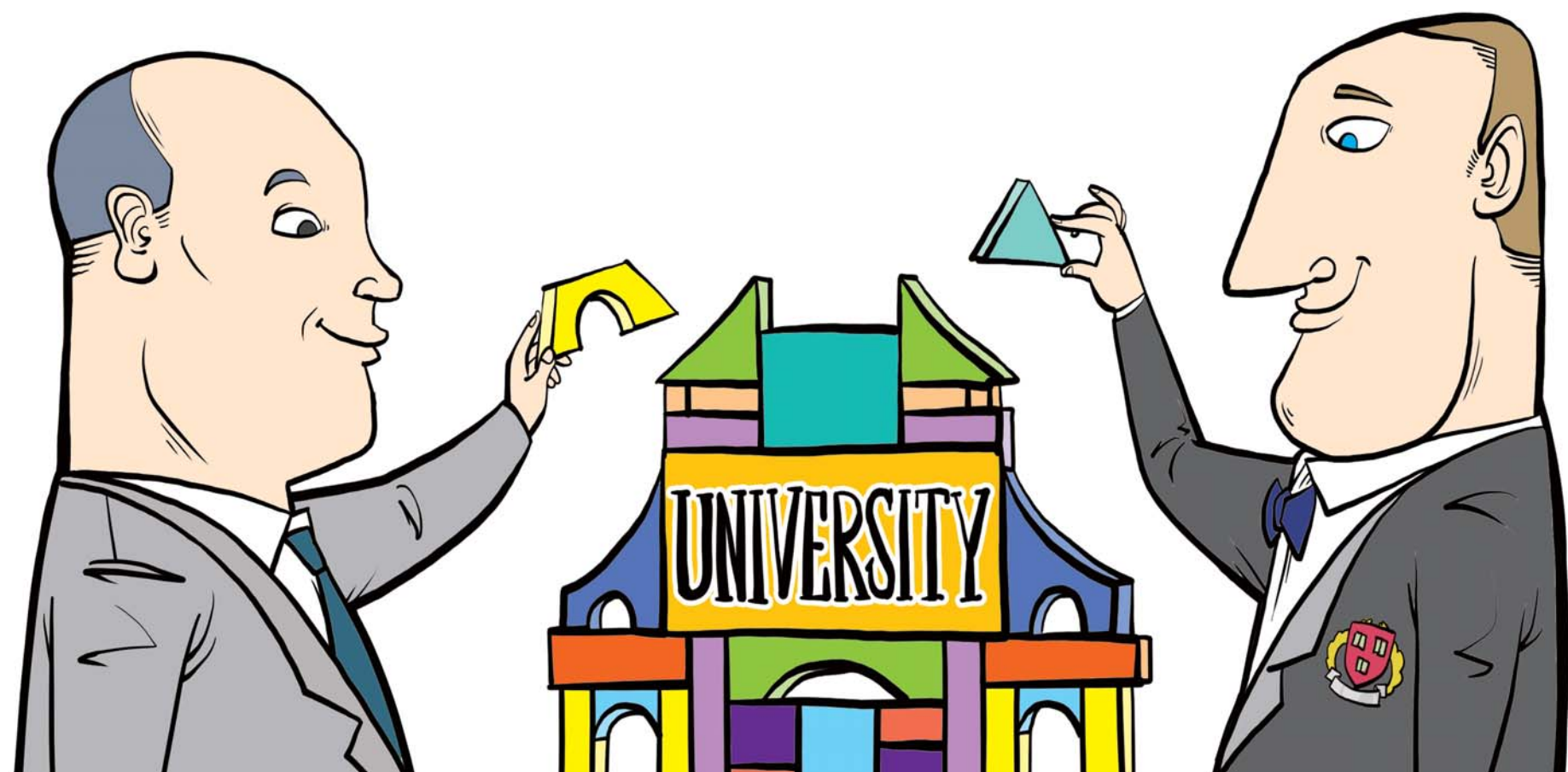


Comment



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Western academia has place in corporate China

By DAVID GREENAWAY
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The process of globalization has always produced fascinating synergies. One that merits particular attention at present is the ever-strengthening relationship between Chinese business and Western academia — an association that is earning growing recognition and increasingly delivering benefits for both sides.

The fundamental reasons for the nascent integration of Eastern and Western economies is extensively documented and well known. China still needs overseas partners to supercharge its journey to an innovation economy, while the West needs access to China's already massive market for infrastructure, services and products.

The impetus for academia's involvement, however, is perhaps less appreciated.

Part of the explanation lies in the changing face of the academic sphere itself. In the UK, for instance, universities with strong reputations rooted in research once viewed the publication of results in esteemed journals as an end in itself.

Now it is imperative to account for our work's "impact" on society, science and culture. Success is most compellingly demonstrated not in

the pages of peer-reviewed tomes but in tangible evidence of having made a genuine difference to the wider world.

Some universities can achieve this more easily than others. Those that have determinedly embedded across their knowledge-transfer activities a grasp of innovation and the skills necessary to generate robust partnerships with research collaborators, businesses and governments are inevitably better placed than those that have neglected to do so. And for those that have made the effort, those that have shown the required foresight, where better to seek potential and reward than in the country almost universally regarded as a superpower-elect?

After all, just as it is in the UK, now is a critical time for both society and the economy in China. China's appetite for new thinking and novel technologies is vast and wide-ranging, driven by the enormous challenges of urbanization, the economic empowerment of the middle class and significant shifts in demand, diet and lifestyle. Beijing is confronted by the pivotal task of mitigating the risks of unprecedented social transformation while simultaneously accelerating the delivery of services — public utilities, financial security, health-care and life opportunities — to a

more demanding generation.

High-quality employment is one of the key expectations. This requires ongoing economic growth and a smooth transition to a knowledge-based economy with a much more prominent services sector. China's Mode 1 manufacturing — the churning out of high-volume, low-margin products for export — is becoming more outdated as a new wave of high-tech, green-tech companies moves up the value chain.

A greater proportion of domestic design and innovation is undoubtedly playing its part in this metamorphosis, but Western experience and assistance remain vital to China's ascent. The opportunities for Western universities are therefore considerable, as the University of Nottingham appreciates better than most.

Yang Fujia, who has been our chancellor for more than 10 years, was the first Chinese academic to be appointed chancellor of a British university. We opened a full branch campus in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, in 2006, following a similar scheme in Semenyih, Malaysia, in 2000. Having exhibited a level of commitment and prescience at the time unrivalled by any other Western institution, we are now seeing the value of our efforts manifested in the enablement of trade and the nurturing of future talent in the

form of not only our graduates but our faculties' expertise. To quote the Sunday Times University Guide 2011, we have become "the embodiment of the modern international university".

In achieving this we have recognized that effective partnerships rely on organizational cultures that foster long-term commitment. Short-term business priorities, unreasonable market returns and high people turnover all lead to early failure in China. We have learned to appreciate the importance of investing care and effort in building relationships.

To this end, visibility in the local market and the signalling of commitment through physical presence have a profound effect on establishing connections and cultivating mutual respect. The business culture in China engenders a refreshing level of directness — but only after a proper period of ritual courtship.

First there is an initial phase of engagement; then projects suddenly move on very rapidly, with critical decisions made on a weekly or sometimes even daily basis. Once earned, there is a responsiveness to information needs and a flexibility in meetings and logistics that many Westerners might find surprising.

Adjacent to this is the supply of high-quality graduates, an issue

that still challenges domestic and international companies in China. In due course these individuals will be the real drivers of innovation and its implementers within State and private organizations.

Finally, we should remember that innovation is not confined to new technologies. It covers management, marketing, corporate governance and other essential concerns that involve the sophisticated juggling of technical, financial and social considerations, as well as the indispensable capacity to make Western models work in a Chinese context.

Successive five-year plans recognize this and legitimize new resources to incentivize returners, equip key managers with international know-how and bring foreign training providers into the market.

As our own experience of working with and in China proves, strategic alliances between higher education and business offer huge potential. Underpinned by a willingness to think creatively and a dedication to investing in relationships, they represent win-win partnerships — as East and West alike are now rightly acknowledging on an ever-larger scale.

This, ultimately, is the enduring corollary of globalization: a diverse, rewarding and constantly changing world of opportunity.

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