

Trying for the best of both worlds

While movement of students between domestic and foreign universities slows, China's joint-venture model is gaining traction. **By Cong Cao**

China's joint-venture model is an emerging area of international higher education to watch, particularly at a time when the opportunities and appetite for Chinese students to study abroad are diminished – at least temporarily – due to COVID-19.

Since my employer, the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), opened its doors in 2004 in the east-coast province of Zhejiang as the country's first Sino-foreign joint venture university (JVU), another eight have been established.

JVUs have two 'parent' institutions, one from mainland China, and one from another location. Parent institutions for current JVUs come from the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, Israel and Hong Kong. As independent legal entities under Chinese law, they have powers to select and appoint administrators, attract and compete for global talent and award internationally recognized degrees. The collective output and impact of JVUs in the Nature Index is very small relative to more established universities in China, in part because their faculty members tend to be younger and at an earlier career stage.

JVUs are also much smaller than most of China's universities – the majority have less than half the current student enrolment of the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC) in Hefei, the leading Chinese academic institution in the Nature Index in 2020, and less than one-fifth that of Peking University in Beijing, ranked second.

JVUs are on a promising trajectory, with several new institutions recently approved by the Chinese government. They are considered valuable additions to China's higher-education landscape because their parent institutions bring high-quality educational resources, best practice, advanced curricula and textbooks to China. As such, JVUs offer an alternative for Chinese students who are looking to study 'abroad' without having to leave home. They also offer a supportive environment for foreign students studying in China, where they can learn in English and other languages. The Sino-French Aviation University, to be based in the east-coast city of Hangzhou and run by China's Beihang University and the French Civil Aviation University, is among the new approvals. More JVUs are under consideration.



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By law, JVUs must be physically located on the mainland of China, Chinese citizens must make up more than half of their governing body and a resident Chinese citizen must hold the post of president. But the parent institution appoints the executive vice-president, usually a foreigner.

Having a foreign executive in charge of the daily operations of the university is a feature unique to JVUs in China, as is their ability to directly copy or adopt programmes and curricula from their parent institutions. The Duke Kunshan University in eastern China's Jiangsu province, for instance, mobilized faculty in its founding institutions, Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and Wuhan University in Wuhan, China, to co-design entirely new liberal arts programmes and curricula.

UNNC, by contrast, follows almost the exact same programme specifications and curricula as its international parent institution, the University of Nottingham, UK. According to a survey conducted in 2013, one of the most influential factors in students deciding to enrol in UNNC at that time was the perception that the end product is a British degree, which could open up greater career opportunities. Around 90% of the UNNC student body is Chinese. (A. Onsmann *The Australian Universities' Review* 55, 15–23; 2013).

JVUs offer students the opportunity to study abroad, from one semester to two years, at the parent university or other foreign institutions. The aim is for the students to hone their critical and independent thinking, learn about new cultures and build strong transnational networks. Approximately 60–75% of the research output from some JVUs between 2015 and 2020 involved collaborators from outside China, according to the Dimensions from Digital Science database. This is a much higher proportion than at regular Chinese universities, which suggests that such efforts to build cross-border relationships may already be bearing fruit. By comparison, 30% of USTC's output involved overseas collaborators in the same period.

Although the transnational ties of China's JVUs are arguably their greatest asset, they also pose challenges. For one thing, many JVU faculty members – including those of Chinese origin who have lived abroad for an extended period – are unfamiliar with the domestic research environment, which can hinder their ability to seek local funding and collaborators, and navigate policies. JVUs are also less well-known to students and their parents than other Chinese universities and they offer a limited choice of degrees, encompassing the social sciences, natural sciences and engineering, but not law or medicine.

In order to compete with more established Chinese institutions for grants and students, JVUs have significant obstacles to overcome. Even so, their ongoing development testifies to China's growing interest in supporting more open and experimental models in its higher-education sector.