



# English language teaching and educational reform in Western China: A knowledge management perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of a large-scale UK-based teacher development programme on innovation and change in English language education in Western China within a knowledge management (KM) framework. Questionnaire data were collected from 229 returnee teachers in 15 cohorts. Follow-up interviews and focus groups were conducted with former participants, middle and senior managers, and teachers who had not participated in the UK programme. The results showed evidence of knowledge creation and amplification at individual, group and inter-organizational levels. However, the present study also identified knowledge creation potential through the more effective organization of follow-up at the national level, particularly for the returnee teachers. It is argued that the KM framework might offer a promising alternative to existing models and metaphors of Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in education internationally and teachers' professional development is seen as crucial to educational reform and sustainable global development (Day & Sachs, 2004; Kennedy, 2014; Swaffield, 2014; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Traditional approaches to CPD in education, often known as in-service training or INSET, have been criticized for their static nature (e.g. as one-off events) (Smith, 2014) and narrow focus on the transmission of knowledge and skills. Some models of CPD, for example, the Training Model and the Cascade Model, as described in Kennedy (2014), reflect the focus on knowledge transmission from the "experts" to teachers or from the centre to the periphery. Current models of CPD, however, tend to emphasize teachers' professional development as a long-term process in which teachers actively participate in the collaborative construction of understanding to promote transformative practice and autonomy (Kennedy, 2014; Smith, 2014; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). However, as observed by Rose and Reynolds (cited in Smith, 2014), the long term impact of CPD is rarely assessed. The present paper aims to fill this gap by evaluating the impact of a UK-based CPD programme for Chinese teachers of English within an innovative analytical framework – knowledge management (KM). The study is part of a larger joint evaluation project between a British University and the China Scholarship Council, with research funding from the British Council, looking at the impact of overseas training on Chinese teachers' return to China (Edwards & Li, 2011; Li & Edwards, 2013; NCLL, 2010).

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## 2. Context of the present study

### 2.1. China's policy of reform and opening up

The priority of the Chinese national policy of reform and opening up since the late 1970s has been the acquisition of advanced science and technology from developed (predominantly Western) countries. Two approaches stand out. One is “bringing in” (*qing jin lai*) and the other “going out” (*zou chu qu*) (Xu & Xie, 2011). “Bringing in” is typified by joint or sole foreign ventures in China and the parachuting in of what are called foreign experts to the country. “Going out” is characterized by the sponsored study trips of large numbers of key personnel or talent in the areas of science and technology, the main body of the million strong overseas study population in this 30-year period (1978–2007) (Cheng, 2009).

English language education has followed a similar trend. For example, hundreds of ELT (English Language Teaching) specialists from Western English speaking countries have been invited to teach at universities and schools across the country (Ouyang, 2003). Of considerable influence are the joint teacher training programmes in China involving western organizations such as the British Council and China's Ministry of Education (e.g. Gu, 2005; Ouyang, 2003; Yan, 2008). Equally important is the significant number of English language teachers whose foreign language advantage has enabled them to join the exodus of the million strong Chinese students and scholars to study abroad. The Western Programme, to be discussed below, is a major Chinese national programme designed specially to redress the balance between the Western Region and the rest of China.

### 2.2. The Western Programme

The Special Programme for the Cultivation of Talent in the Western Region (or The Western Programme for short) was launched in September 2002 (Sohu, 2002). It was a national education development policy embedded in the great Western Region Development Strategy (WRDS) (Grewal & Ahmed, 2011) designed to reduce regional disparities and promote long-term social and economic development of the Western Region. The Western Programme aims to promote international exchange and collaboration by learning from the experiences of developed countries in the West (Sohu, 2002). The rationale for the Western Programme was as follows: Central Government funding for the overseas study of teaching, research and administrative personnel has been increased, particularly since the establishment of the China Scholarship Council (CSC) in 1996, making a significant contribution to China's modernization drive. However, the existing scheme, with its national uniform selection criteria, including English language requirements, had placed the Western Region at a disadvantage compared with the Middle and Eastern Regions. Consequently, there has been a low level of participation and lack of enthusiasm, reducing the impact of the scheme in the Western Region (Sohu, 2002).

With the targeted support of the Western Programme over the past 10 years or so, however, large numbers of teaching, research and administrative personnel from the region have studied in Western countries for periods of between three and 12 months. The vast majority are drawn from higher education and research institutes in the region and are normally sent overseas as Academic Visitors. However, in 2003, a sub-programme within the Western Programme was launched by the CSC. It offered secondary teachers of English in the region the opportunity to study in the UK so that they could be exposed to “advanced methods” in foreign language teaching. The launch of the programme came at a time when education in China was undergoing a period of innovation and change, the main feature of which was the emphasis on students' overall development, or quality-oriented education, in order to combat the weaknesses of the traditional, more narrowly focused knowledge transmission and exam-oriented model of education. Wang (2007, p. 93) captured the mood thus:

It was generally felt by the government, the national educational authorities, as well as teachers and parents that there was something wrong with the current educational practices. That is, our students were being spoon-fed a lot of knowledge and spending a tremendous amount of time memorizing facts for examinations. They lacked the ability to think independently, to cope with things in real life, to care for others, and to learn by themselves. For many children and young adults, learning is not a happy experience but a miserable ordeal.

English (as a foreign language), one of the key subjects in the school curriculum in China (alongside Chinese and Mathematics), is no exception. Teachers tend to emphasize the delivery of knowledge about the language (e.g. vocabulary and grammatical structures) at the expense of developing students' ability to communicate in the language. A largely teacher-centred pedagogy does little to develop students' motivation or individuality (Wang, 2007).

### 2.3. The English language teacher programme

The sub-programme for English language teachers, delivered for the CSC as three-month courses in the UK, addresses these concerns. The courses target six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan), five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang), and one municipality (Chongqing), which comes directly under Central Government control.

The main aims and objectives of the courses are to enhance the participants' knowledge and understanding of current theory and practice in English Language Education (ELE), to improve their linguistic skills, and to deepen their cultural understanding. The ultimate objective is to help build the capacity of teachers to lead reform in ELE in the Western Region. To

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