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# **TRYING TO ESTABLISH A LIFELONG LEARNING SYSTEM AND A LEARNING SOCIETY IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY IN CHINA**

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## **Introduction**

In 2002 China Government set forth the objective of building up a learning system and a learning society. It indicates that the oldest idea of lifelong learning had entered into a new stage, from concept to public policy, from the ideals to the action in China. Lifelong learning is now widely believed to be essential for everyone and has become a guiding principle for policy initiatives ranging from national economic competitiveness to social cohesion and personal fulfillment. The oldest Chinese proverb, “keep on learning as long as you live”, has transformed from person’s dream to the social realities.

### **I. The driving forces of establishing a learning system and learning society**

In today’s China, We live in the era of innovation characterized by urbanization, marketization, demographic change and globalization. The emerging knowledge-based economy integrated rapid technological development and is changing the nature of work and the skills required in almost every occupation. In order to keep pace with changes in work organization and production technology, people need increasingly to renew and upgrade their skills in a rapidly changing environment. Ensuring lifelong learning for all is one of the determinant factors to promote socio-economic development and build a harmonious society.

Lifelong learning is responding to transition from industry-based economy to knowledge-based economy.

With the rapid development of science and technology and social progress, the total amount of knowledge human being created is growing greatly. The knowledge and skill people acquired in the schools or universities have not caught up the demand of work and personal fulfillment. The rapid changes in the structure of employment and in the organization of work have drastically altered the form and the content of jobs. People have to learn all the time and upgrade their skills to keep pace with the development of era.

Lifelong learning strategy is responding to employment pressure and restructure.

China has a population of about 1.3 billion, and is a populous country in the world. There is a large working-age population, while the average educational level of the people is relatively low. With the development and establishment of a market-oriented employment mechanism, the Chinese government is clearly aware that the country will

face severe employment pressure due to various factors, such as the huge population base, population migration from rural regions to towns or cities, age structure of the population, employment structure change. In the first five years of the Century (2001-2005), the population of working age increased by 13.6 million annually on average. By the year 2020, the total population of working age will reach 940 million. There are now 150 million rural surplus laborers who need to be transferred, and over 11 million unemployed and laid-off persons who need to be employed or reemployed. The contradiction between overall supply of and demand for labor is thus sharp. Therefore, in order to relieve employment pressure and restructure in China, we have to promote stakeholders to carry out a series of comprehensive policies, such as making lifelong learning a reality.

Lifelong learning is the engine of economic growth and propeller of economy restructuring.

Chinese economy is growing at a fast rate, with an astounding 9.6% per annum from 1978 to 2005. It represents a doubling of production every ten years. China's share of world exports has increased from 1% to almost 6% between 1980 and 2003. The export or import/GDP ratio has increased from 5% to 25% during the same period. It is reported that China ranks among top growth performers of the world economic history.

We are aware that such amazing successes do not guarantee that the future will devoid of major difficulties. Some of the challenges that lie ahead are quite formidable. This is because the quality of economy growth is too low. We have to afford natural resource depletion and the environment effects. It resulted in discussion of socio-economic development strategy. In China, we have a relatively inadequate resource per capita. Human resources are China's main asset and advantage. Human resources are central to the creation and transmission of knowledge and a determining factor in the socio-economic development. Invest in education and training is a prerequisite for achieving the economic, social and environmental goals set by the Nation. However, the economic development has not transferred to the track of depending on science and technology and improving the quality of laborers. With the development of economy restructuring and urbanization in China, more and more laborers will be transferred in different sectors and regions. It demands absolutely lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is the base of building a harmonious society.

With the rapid socio-economic development in China, a new phenomenon of inequality is emerging due to seeking efficiency. The trends of income inequality between regions and households have increased quite substantially, as well as an increasing rural-urban divide. At the end of 2005, China had a rural population of 23.65 million living in extreme poverty, as defined by those with a per-capita yearly income of less than 683 yuan (84 U.S. dollars). The income inequality is one of the important factors influencing construction of a harmonious society. We analysed the essence of income difference between the rural and the urban, the rich and the poor, different groups originate from difference of knowledge and education. People with more schooling are likely to make choices throughout life. The practice has proved that lifelong learning is the rational choice to remedy the earlier shortage of education by lifelong learning. Therefore, lifelong learning is the best way to alleviate inequality of life.

Lifelong learning is the best way to promote education reform.

China's education achieved a great impression in recent years. The school entrance rates at different levels have risen steadily. China has basically realized the 9-year compulsory education, basically eliminated illiteracy among the young and middle aged population. The school entrance rates at the upper secondary school have maintained on the level of 47.5% regardless of the fact that school agers have been continuously increasing. The gross rate of enrollment in schools of higher learning reached 21 percent in 2005 and it indicates that China has entered the stage of popular education. China has the capacity to carry out lifelong learning. However, one of the most important problems facing China's education is that we pay much attention to school-based education, pay much attention to the school certificate. It resulted in great negative impact on youth education. The students and their families are entering the track of preparing for continuous examination. Curriculum reform and competence-based education are difficult to carry out. Therefore, we need to promote school-based education in the framework of lifelong learning to alleviate the useless examination competition and put quality education into practice.

## **II. Implementing lifelong learning strategy**

Considering China's huge size and regional diversity and gaps in economic development and education and training needs, it is hard to have a one-size-fits-all approach to establishing learning communities. There is no ready-made model to follow and it is best to learn from experiences and other countries.

By far, China is one of the most decentralized countries in the world in public financing. While some eastern provinces are discussing a 12-year compulsory education system, the western region is still struggling to provide 9-year basic education system. Individually, both rural and urban residents are increasingly relying on themselves to pay for education. The government's share of the total education expenditure declined from 84.5% in 1991 to 68.0% in 2007, while the share of tuition and incidental fees rose from 4.4% to 17.5% in the same period. It is a determinant stage for China's socio-economic development in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In terms of implementing lifelong learning strategy in China, we can summarize the following:

### **2.1. Ensuring initial education is the first step of ensuring lifelong learning for all.**

Although China Government has made remarkable achievements in ensuring education for all in recent years, the supply capacity of education is relatively low. In 2004 the average educational attainment of the population aged above 16 years old is 8.3 years, corresponds to 11.8 in OECD countries. China has realized 94.1% coverage of the 9-year compulsory education. But the national compulsory complete rate is only 82.4%. The quality and level of compulsory education is a long way to go. There is a great difference between the urban and the rural sectors, between different regions in fields of compulsory education. The development of upper secondary school left behind, the upper secondary entrant rate is only 47.5%. In order to implement the strategy objective, Ministry of Education is carrying out action in the following aspects:

Firstly, compulsory education is the foundation of lifelong learning. No government program available at age 20 can make up for a poor education from ages 6-15. The central government and local governments at all level share the responsibilities to ensure compulsory education for the young. We are carrying out free textbooks, free lodge project for children living in the rural and poor families.

Secondly, rising skill demands of labor market have made qualification at the upper secondary level of education the minimum credential for lifelong learning and sustainable labor market entry. Occupations are changing dramatically. It is estimated that over half jobs done by Chinese today did not exist in 1980's and dozens of new occupations are emerging annually. We live in a world in which 80 percent of the fastest-growing jobs will require upper-secondary education. Therefore, China Government has making various measures to make breakthrough of the bottleneck for upper secondary education. By 2020 we are planning to universalize upper secondary education. The central government has adopted a special state grant of 800 million yuan (US\$ 99 million) for upper secondary students to cover tuition from 2006. This new action will increase attractiveness to the young and promote more rural student entering competitive labor market.

Finally, the third task is improving the tertiary education system more flexible and adaptable to lifelong learning. In 1998 the Ministry of Education integrated the adult colleges with general universities owing to the decrease of adult students. At the same time, we encourage university to be more open to industry and local regions. Most of the universities in China are carrying out non-formal/informal courses to adapt needs of individuals and enterprises.

## **2.2. Promoting learning organisations and encouraging workplace learning.**

Responding to establishing the nation's learning system and learning society, more and more organisations have set forth the objective of building learning enterprises or learning institutions to meet the challenge of competition. A number of large cooperations have established Enterprise University to provide diversified training for managers and workers, such as Haier University. This training helps participants to have more opportunities to develop and achieve their full potential in workplace. It is an important arena of lifelong learning because most of the purposeful learning activities are to promote career development and to improve individual's employability. Up to now, most of the enterprises have carried out job-related training for their managers and workers.

## **2.3. Financing lifelong learning for disadvantage groups.**

Ministries related to the lifelong learning, such as Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor and Security, Ministry of Agriculture are carrying out comprehensive policy to finance lifelong learning for transferred rural laborers transfer and laid-off workers re-employment.



The ministry of Labor and Security financed 8 million migrants' training workers in 2006, helping them to upgrade skills and making them more competitive in the job market.

The Ministry of Agriculture will provide skills training for up to 100 million farmers in the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010). It is estimated that 50 million farmers will undertake training programs in agricultural technology, while the other 50 million will receive training in other professions than farming.

#### **2.4 . Developing distance education by ICT.**

ICT is changing the education module faster than we can imagine. In term of 18<sup>th</sup> Internet Development Statistics in China, Internet users have reached 123 millions in 2006. 80 millions of the users are the youth. Among 36 million upper secondary school students, half of the students are Internet users.

The China government pays great importance of ICT usage to the lifelong learning strategy. In 2005 there were about 1500 universities and institutions connected to China Education and Research Network (CERNET) with about 20 million end users. 3 million registered students in 66 tertiary distance education institutes represent 13% of the total tertiary education students. 46% of the primary and secondary schools in urban area have established the Campus LAN, while the figure in rural area is much lower.

We are planning to connect every school to Internet, and make every classroom in the city and every school in rural area has access to online educational resources by 2020. It is anticipated that over 50% of the higher education institutes will provide distance courses to learners; over 10% of the enterprises will carry out web-based training programs by 2020.

### **III. Moving forward to Ensure Lifelong Learning for All**

#### **3.1. Promulgating lifelong learning law by the Congress to ensure sharing the common responsibility among employers, employee, unions and government.**

We are in the process of formulating lifelong learning law. It will be promulgate by the Congress in the near future. In terms of the current regulation, enterprises should spend at least 1.5% of the employee's wage bill on job-related training. In fact, the regulation has not been put in practice because local governments protect the benefits of the employers overly. Therefore, we need the lifelong learning law to balance responsibility and

obligatory requirement among governments, employers and employees. For example, all actors related to the lifelong learning, such as public authorities, the world of business and individuals should accept their share of responsibility to ensure lifelong learning for all. Governments must lay the foundation for lifelong learning. Employers must take on responsibility to build employees' skills throughout their career. An individual should plan their career development and invest in updating of their knowledge, skills and attitude timely. Furthermore, lifelong learning should be a central element of the contractual relationship between employer and employees. Collective bargaining and individual labor contracts should incorporate explicit rights and duties in lifelong learning.

### **3.2 . Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of National Qualification System.**

We have established the national qualification system by the Ministry of Labor and Security. It includes 5 grades and more than one hundred occupations. One of the challenges is the qualification certificates workers acquired could not provide accurate assessment of individual's knowledge, skills and attitude. We should invite the world of industries, employers and other partners to get involved into the qualification system so that the qualification system could assess an individual's competence. We need a bridge between school-based certificate and professional certificates, especially in vocational school and the qualification system.

### **3.3 . Integrating learning resources and creating lifelong learning culture.**

In order to establish a lifelong learning system and learning society, we need to integrate all learning resources, such as museums, library, magazines, newspapers, radio and television, etc. to promote provision of the learning activities. Lifelong learning is a shared goal relating to the attitudes and behavior of many employers, individuals and organizations. Government has a part to play but government alone cannot achieve the objective. The strategy of government is to establish the platform where people, families, communities and organizations are most likely to carry out lifelong learning activities. We need to mobilize all the learning resources to create learning culture.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this is a time of change and opportunity. We live in a very different world today than the one our parents and grandparents knew. In that world, what we depend on



is the organization which we work and today we live in the community. In that world, a single occupation could last a lifetime, from Graduation Day to retirement; a single skill could ensure a worker a comfortable living for his or her family. Today, there are fewer guarantees of stability and security than ever before. But there are far more numerous opportunities — if we are prepared to seize them. Lifelong learning is the best tool for us to take advantage of the opportunity. Of course, it is a great challenge and responsibility or a great transition of social welfare policy for policy makers and researchers to promote a seamless educational continuum from compulsory education through college and beyond, to serve young students and adults seeking to adapt to the changing global economy.