



# Sino-Nordic Degree Collaborations:

*Report from workshop at Nordic Centre, October 17, 2016*

**Collaborations between Chinese and Nordic universities on offering full degrees jointly come with a range of challenges and benefits. However, the subject of international double degrees is under-researched, and there is a need for sharing experiences and best practices between institutions. On October 17, 2016, practitioners from the member institutions of Nordic Centre, Fudan University and their partners gathered in Shanghai to share the cases of their own degree collaborations, and compare experiences within various issues pertaining to them. This report summarizes the key findings of the workshop.**

Appendix A: List of workshop presenters

Appendix B (separate file): Case presentations from workshop

## Institutionalized collaboration

Entering a degree collaboration means not only offering a joint education program, but institutionalizing a partnership between two or more universities. Given the strong links between research and education this means that degree collaborations also have the effect of institutionalizing collaborations between departments on the research side – and retaining strong potential for continued collaboration when individual researchers leave a department, which otherwise spells loss of networks.

Examples of institutionalized joint research between institutions collaborating on degrees include, inter alia, the University of Oslo and Zhejiang University (the Airborne Project) and Shanghai Jiaotong University and NTNU – Norwegian School of Science and Technology (joint research centre within sustainable energy). In the latter case the degree collaboration followed research collaboration.

It also means closer contacts between administrators at various levels of the universities, as is the case with the MBA program offered in collaboration between BI Norwegian Business School and Fudan University's School of Management, whose academic deans meet regularly in support of both research and education program development.

Cross-pollination of teaching methods is another outcome, since students experience the way teaching is done in another culture at another department; in the experience of the University of Copenhagen-



Zhejiang University program and the Jiaotong-NTNU program, this can inspire teachers on both sides to adopt new methods.

This comprehensive aspect of degree collaborations can also be beneficial to attracting funding. The Swedish funding agency STINT, for example, places importance on the comprehensive involvement of researchers/teachers, students, and administrators in part because this helps infuse an international element in both research and education.

***The above benefits of comprehensive collaboration should not mean that every ambition should be implemented at once. At the workshop it was recommended several times to “start soft” and build upon a core of collaboration, whether research- or educational, and then expanding to a more comprehensive institutionalized collaboration gradually. There can be hurdles along the way, and both sides in the agreement are recommended to be open to an active dialogue to retain mutual trust and continued revisions where they make sense.***

## Examinations and theses

Examinations are a source of various challenges in international degree collaborations:

If the program feature joint classes of Chinese and Nordic students, the form of examination chosen tends to favor the students used to it in their home academic culture. There can be dilemmas concerning how to grade students; one dispute mentioned at the workshop was that the Chinese side can take a less comprehensive approach to evaluation.

In the case of the Copenhagen-Oslo-Aarhus-Zhejiang parallel degree collaboration, the Nordic students need to write an “upgraded” version of the Zhejiang thesis in order to attain credits at their home institution. Furthermore, while Danish/Norwegian researchers are involved in grading the Zhejiang thesis (in collaboration with Chinese researchers), the reverse is not true due to internal rules at the Nordic universities.

For thesis defenses, there is a dilemma of how to conduct joint evaluation. International travel can be too costly a solution, and defenses via Skype are not allowed according to Chinese rules. In the case of NTNU-Jiaotong’s collaboration, they have even so chosen to conduct a common defense with jury from both institutions. In the case of Lund University’s collaborations with Fudan, the former’s students defend their thesis at home, after writing an English-language thesis with a long abstract in Chinese.

In the case of Gothenburg and Fudan’s program, a long abstract of the thesis must be translated to Chinese, which is also costly.



***Examinations can pose major challenges due to cultural differences, varying academic expectations, and practical issues like geographical distance and translation. There can be solutions to these issues – but they tend to cost money, and time.***

## Student recruitment

Student recruitment is a major issue in international degree collaborations, especially because having enough students in many cases is crucial to financial sustainability. Students may be reluctant to relocate to the other side of the world for any number of reasons – leaving family behind, pollution concerns, skepticism about quality – even if it is only temporary.

Motivations for going to China from the Nordic region – or vice versa – can vary greatly between disciplines. For social scientists the foreign society is a draw in itself; for natural sciences the kinds of equipment you have access to is more crucial.

In language-based programs such as the one between Copenhagen, Aarhus, Oslo, and Zhejiang, fear of not understanding the academic Chinese can dissuade enrollment. The students arriving in China may not be at quite the right Chinese entry level to understand the local professors, who often are not used to adjusting their way of speaking to foreigners.

Given that students in China are often connected to a professor at an earlier stage than is the case in Nordic countries, Chinese academics often have more sway over students in choosing a double degree program for their master's. Also, media reports sometimes exaggerate the relative slowing down of the Chinese economy, whose rapid pace has previously been a bigger draw. For both these reasons, it can be harder to convince the Nordic students to enroll than the Chinese, making the programs costly on a per-student basis.

Recruitment is more complicated when both Chinese and international students are mixed in, since they apply with different examinations from previous education, the Chinese having had to pass the national entrance examination for the programme in question.

***However, universities need to ask themselves why they are engaging in joint programs. Sometimes it is not just about educating a great number of students from home, but about attracting students from the other side of the world – in addition to the collateral benefits accruing to more comprehensive collaboration. It can also be about adding specific cultural skills that would not be gained in alternatives like regular exchange programs, which often leave foreign students isolated from the locals.***

***In some cases, the programs can be sustainable even without a great number of students; for the NTNU-Jiaotong program, the Norwegian students are already enrolled in a five-year program anyway, and the double master's program is an option for the last two years. The same is true of the Lund-***



***Fudan two-year master programmes, in which students from existing programmes can opt for a double degree.***

***If the number of students is crucial to the motivations for degree collaborations, one way to increase scale is to involve more institutions from more countries.***

## Legal issues

Chinese university degrees are nationally issued, and thus not legally issued by universities themselves. For this reason, Chinese universities do not have the right to issue actual joint degrees with foreign institutions. However, a recent reform in China is piloting the right of universities to grant degrees, and will have the potential to enable joint-degree cooperation between Chinese universities and their international partners. Indeed, the Long- and Medium-Term Education Development Plan from 2010 promulgated by the Chinese State Council encourages this. [Read more here.](#)

It was reported at the workshop that the programs offered by Sino-Danish Centre in Beijing are indeed registered with the Ministry of Education, but that getting them approved has been a lengthy, bureaucratic process.

For this reason, degree collaborations are usually done in other ways than establishing a new joint degree:

The foreign entity can issue the degree unilaterally, even if the program in every other way is a joint venture. This is the case with the MBA program that BI Norwegian Business School offers – the program involves staff and admins from both institutions, but the degree is from BI only, with a local certificate from the Fudan School of Management.

Two (or more) institutions can offer *parallel* degrees. This is a common approach shared by many of the degree collaborations presented at the workshop. The Nordic home institution is in general free to tailor its own program to offer a degree, while the Chinese side enrolls students according to existing procedures and regulations without creating a new degree per se. This means that sometimes Nordic and Chinese students can't follow exactly the same programs; there can be differences in mandatory courses, academic credits, requirements of previous educational background (Chinese master's programs are often more flexible in this regard) duration of theses, and other regulations that vary between the two institutions, which then must work out an agreement that allows them both to grant a degree.

***It was recommended at the workshop to sign two agreements. One memorandum of understanding (MOU) to align expectations, give an expression of will to carry the program out, including funding, and provide a very general commitment. This provides a safer environment for negotiating specifics in***



***a final agreement that includes more specifics, such as how to deal with examination issues (see above), how to compose program committees, what the financial specifics are, termination and renewal, and procedures of handling disagreements (e.g. should there be a mediator). A termination clause / exit plan should also help determine the legal status of students enrolled in the program in case it gets shut down.***

## Employability

In general, international double degrees can benefit students with the strengths of two different departments with a greater combined pool of knowledge than a single institution, in addition to the cultural skills that come with living in a foreign country and being enrolled in one of its educational institutions. Such cultural skills and width of knowledge are important for both Nordic and Chinese graduates in a range of fields, as was underscored by company representatives at the workshop.

However, these benefits do not guarantee employability. While cultural competencies are very attractive to many employers, having some sort of international experience is in many places a prerequisite rather than a competitive advantage; and choosing any sort of education or experience comes with opportunity costs. One should not take for granted that international double degrees give greater employability than other alternative paths to competence – be they internships abroad, student jobs in international settings at home, volunteer work, or combinations of these and other pursuits. This is especially true in an international labor market marked by university-degree inflation.

But there are ways to make double degrees increase employability further, whether by the student enrolled or the institutions that offer them. ***Integrating an internship*** or other kind of workplace engagement in a double degree is one way to do this. Another is securing greater integration with the other culture, and not letting the time in the other country be spent exclusively with other foreigners.

Increasingly, foreign companies in China hire Chinese managers rather than foreign ones. In many cases a Chinese manager with knowledge of Nordic culture will be preferred to the converse. This is especially true for companies with a well-established China presence. It is unclear whether this tendency will prevail in the future, but current trends point to international double degrees being more beneficial to Chinese graduates than Nordic ones in terms of employability.

The employability of an international-double-degree graduate also depends on what field or job they are going in to. Some positions prefer candidates with a combination of different skills plus cultural insights, others candidates with highly specialized knowledge. Hence the value of an international double degree may be higher to an engineer looking to advance to a higher management position, for example, than one wanting a higher degree of specialization. It should also be noted that employability also varies with specificity of cultural knowledge, whether in the Nordic Region or China: It is one thing to “be familiar with Chinese culture” and quite another to “be knowledgeable about marketing to Chinese consumers.”



Furthermore, international double degrees may be more valuable as further education for those in the middle of their careers who want to shift gears.

***Various aspects of taking a Sino-Nordic double degree can be advantageous to a candidate's employability, including the international / inter-cultural experience it grants, and being exposed to the strengths of two different institutions. However, having international experience is expected in today's job market, and not something that makes a candidate stand out. And taking any kind of degree comes at the opportunity cost of other pursuits that would bolster a CV. For this reason, incorporating an internship or other kinds of workplace engagement activities in the double degree is recommended for employability purposes.***

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***Please see separate file for Appendix B, which contains the case presentations of many of the above participants.***