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Canada and China Discuss Growing Opportunities for Education Ties

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Opportunities abound for greatly expanding educational collaboration between China and Canada, and both nations could benefit from augmenting their partnerships, exchanges, and joint research, according to officials from both nations who gathered at a forum here on Sunday.

"I sense there's a renewed interest from China, a heightened interest in increasing programs," said Karen McBride, president of the Canadian Bureau of International Education, which sponsored the forum on the opening day of its annual conference.

Canada has a long history of welcoming students from China, Ms. McBride said in an interview. "They go home after completing their research or their courses saying Canada is the best-kept secret in terms of educational partnerships. I believe that our institutional colleagues from China have heard the message and think it's in the best interest of their students to increase ties with Canada."

Although Canada recognized China diplomatically 39 years ago and has had educational exchanges in place for years, it has seen the United States, Britain, and Australia attract far more students from China. But Ms. McBride and others feel that Canada and China may be on the verge of a new era in educational partnerships. China is the top country of origin for international students in Canada, and most Canadian universities and colleges are stepping up their recruiting in China, especially at the graduate level.

In presentations here on Sunday, senior representatives from more than 20 universities and educational associations in China outlined the educational challenges in their country as it moves to the next economic level.

Educating the 1.5 billion people in China is a key component of "the government's national strategy of rejuvenating our country through science and technology," said Lan Lijun, China's ambassador to Canada who himself attended two Canadian universities.

China has 768 public universities and 48 private ones, according to an overview presented by Xie Weihe, vice president of Tsinghua University, and it is working to make 151 universities into world-class institutions. But with millions of students in high school, it needs many more colleges, he said.

"In 2009, 10 million students passed the national college entrance exam," Mr. Xie said, but only 62 percent of them got places in college.

Linking Community Colleges

China also has a huge market for vocational education, said Chen Guang, vice director general of the National Association of Vocational Education of China. His organization and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges have been discussing increased collaboration.

Paul Brennan, the Canadian association's vice president for international partnerships, said in an interview that some Canadian colleges were already pursuing joint campuses and joint diplomas with Chinese institutions, "but the numbers are still small because at this stage, it's still difficult to work out equivalencies."

The two national associations are working toward a formal agreement that will help with setting credentials, he said.

China encourages students who study abroad to return, Yang Xinyu, deputy secretary general of the China Scholarship Council, told the gathering on Sunday. In 2008, about 180,000 Chinese students went abroad to study, about 12,000 of them on scholarships from the council, she said.

China is "No. 2 in educating graduate students, just under the United States," Ms. Yang said. But China faces challenges in both the quality of graduate-education supervisors and programs, she said, which means that opportunities exist for joint programs and partnerships to develop faculty.

"There are 1.16 million faculty members in China," she said, "but only 42 percent hold master's degrees and 11 percent hold Ph.D.'s."

Mr. Xie, in his presentation, also noted that China itself has become a destination country for international students. "We have more coming than going," he said. Most of the international students coming to China are undergraduates, he said. And more courses are being taught in English, he said, making Chinese universities more attractive to students from English-speaking countries.

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