

# China's higher education policy reform in practice: rejuvenating rural development studies

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## Abstract

The Ministry of Education is currently implementing an ambitious and wide-ranging policy reform process to respond to rapid changing societal demands. The policy covers the establishment of academic specialties, reform of the mode of student training, strengthening teaching management, strengthening character education in universities, reform in the teaching of English, and adjustment of curricula. Based on our own involvement in a change process underway at a number of agricultural universities in the country, we assess the feasibility of implementing the policy (reform) directions in practice, highlighting achievements to date and emerging challenges. We conclude that overall the new policy provides a supportive macro-framework for our reform initiative, but that a number of challenges and difficulties at the meso-level stand in the way of a more effective and efficient delivery process. We make some suggestions for how to deal with these “roadblocks.”

## Introduction: new roles for higher education

“Based on the contacts with the local farmers in Guangxi, I think we have become more mature, what is more, we have learned a lot of useful and meaningful knowledge from the farmers and government officers, which is very important for our future study.”

*CAU/COHD MSc student, Beijing, March, 2006*

In his recent book (2006), Zhou Ji, China's current Minister of Education (MoE), describes in some detail how he/the MoE envisions the role of higher education in the rapidly changing country. He makes a coherent and strong argument for education renewal in order to meet today and tomorrow's demands of socio-economic development. In chapter 3, perhaps the key chapter of the book, entitled *Quality guarantee*, he summarizes recent policies along a number of major components: the establishment of academic specialties, the reform of the mode of student training, strengthening teaching management, strengthening character education in universities, reform in the teaching of English, and adjustment of curricula (ibid: 85-115). He pays special attention to what could be called the inputs required to adequately deliver these policy components. He also identifies the desired achievements; what could be called performance criteria. Taken together, these components make up the core of the new education policy, with a very clear “push” for major changes in higher education affairs, from the more macro to the more micro levels.

In this article we present and reflect on a higher education reform initiative underway in the light of some of the main policy directions set by the MoE as described in Minister Zhou Ji's book. Using this initiative as a “learning by doing” or action-learning case study, we assess the feasibility of implementing the policy (reform) directions in practice, highlighting achievements to date and emerging challenges. We conclude that overall the new policy provides a supportive macro-framework for our reform initiative, but that a number of challenges and difficulties at the meso-level (i.e., at the level of the organizations that make up the higher education system) stand in the way of a more effective and efficient delivery process. We make some suggestions for how to deal with these “roadblocks.” Our findings and reflections are based on direct involvement in the reform initiative described here, from its inception to the ongoing monitoring activities.

This article is structured as follows. We first summarize the main elements of the higher education policy reform. This is followed by a brief description of our reform efforts underway at China Agricultural University (CAU) and Jilin Agricultural University (JLAU). We conclude with a reflection on our practice in the context of the reform policy intent. We provide some suggestions for next steps and recommendations for those who would like to follow in our footsteps.

## **Expected reform results**

On March 3, 2004, the State Council approved the 2003-2007 “Action plan for invigorating education” by the MoE. This Plan is the fundamental blueprint for all parties involved in education to further implement the strategies of “Rejuvenating China through science and education” and “Reinvigorating China through human resource development” and to speed up educational reform and development in the years to come. The new policy directions set out in the Action Plan are based on the observation that China’s society is changing rapidly and that the traditional way of organizing and managing the higher education system is no longer adequate enough to deal with these changes. There is a clear recognition that an education system based on a rigidly top-down planned approach will no longer provide the country with the necessary human resources “to achieve modernization” (Zhou Ji 2006: xiii).

From these fundamental insights, a number of challenges follow. The major ones are described as 1) to train a variety of specialized professionals that meet the demands of socio-economic development; 2) to strengthen students’ comprehensive abilities in particular practical, innovative, creative and entrepreneurial skills; and 3) at the level of resources (or inputs), to share quality resources more effectively and efficiently, i.e., among the organizations within the system (ibid: 85). In another document, these three challenges are described in more detail (Zhou Ji 2004). We summarize the main points:

“First, we should think seriously about the relationship between the educational development and the goal of establishing a well-to-do society by 2020. China is a developing country with a huge population of over 1.3 billion. The most difficult problem for us to tackle during the process of establishing a well-to-do society is the mass population. ... As education plays a fundamental and directing role with overall importance in the establishment of a well-to-do society, it must be prioritized strategically for further development.

Secondly, we should think seriously about the relationship between educational development and the overall development of human beings. ... With the economic and social progress and the development of market economy, the need for employees to be comprehensively developed will be more demanding.

Thirdly, we should think seriously about the relationship between the reform of education system and the perfection of socialist market economy. ... To develop education is one of the practical embodiments of public service for modern government and therefore should be placed at the top of the agenda in public administration system and public fiscal system.”

### ***The establishment of academic specialities***

“Old” disciplines are due for review. The guiding principle for the set-up of new academic specialities is China’s socio-economic development needs. The Minister details this by mentioning that clear job opportunities and a steady demand for professions (two sides of the same coin) are pivotal (Zhou Ji 2006: 86-87). In order to create new specialities, a number of inputs need to be brought together: a clear description of the content matter (general level as well as course level), a feasible educational plan, a sufficient number of qualified teachers, adequate materials and equipment, and funds.

The following guidelines are provided for the adjustment of curricula: increase the general knowledge; increase the number of elective courses; emphasize practical, experimental, and social interaction based courses; use of a cross-disciplinary perspective; use creativity, and stimulate research as part of teaching and training (ibid: 100). Interestingly, the Minister also sketches a proper curriculum development process consisting of six interrelated steps (ibid: 101):

1. Build a contingent of teachers
2. Develop teaching content
3. Develop advanced pedagogy and teaching methods
4. Compile textbooks
5. Reform experimental courses
6. Define new motivation and evaluation mechanisms

## **Reforming the modes of student training and teaching management**

Parallel to the redefinition of specialities, student-training modalities require changes. Narrowly planned and executed training is no longer appropriate. The main directions to follow now are a greater emphasis on basic knowledge and comprehensive abilities, the development of practical skills at the undergraduate level, combining science and arts (this is called “interdisciplinarity”), the integration of theoretical and practical training, and a greater freedom for students to select courses of their own interest (ibid: 88). The Minister seems eager to point out that some universities have made a start with this:

“Universities also lay greater stress on integration of theoretical and practical teaching. Some large, research-oriented universities have gradually implemented a mode of advisory teaching, where an advisor provides academic guidance to a number of undergraduate students. For students, it is an explorative or inspirational learning mode, different from the traditional receptive learning mode. Teachers are better prepared to teach in the form of discussion and elicitation so as to inspire initiative and enthusiasm in their students.” (ibid: 88-89)

Of special interest are a number of measures proposed to improve graduate education. These include the provision of subsidies to outstanding PhD students, the publication of outstanding degree theses, and the improvement of quality evaluation criteria and information systems to ensure credible graduate evaluations (ibid: 93-94). The development of new specialities, courses, and teaching modalities are all part of today’s teaching management practices. In addition, the Minister identifies three other elements required for high quality: the adoption of up-to-date textbooks and courseware, the use of modern educational methods based on interaction with students and elicitation of their ideas, and the offering of advice to students (ibid: 90). Teachers, students, and senior management staff are all responsible for quality control.

Having outlined the main elements of the reform policy, we now turn to practice.

### **Insights from practice: introducing participatory curriculum development**

In the Spring of 2005, after many months of preparatory work by a united group of teachers, researchers and students, a novel, introductory Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) course was delivered at the College of Humanities and Development (COHD), China Agricultural University (CAU), Beijing. A group of twenty-four Master’s and PhD students took part in this first post-graduate level CBNRM for China.<sup>1</sup> Ten teachers and researchers with backgrounds in both natural and social sciences from a variety of higher education and research organizations, contributed to this pioneering process as course facilitators. The students follow one of the three main programs at COHD: rural development and management, sociology, and regional economics.

The course was developed through a participatory curriculum development methodology and guided by insights from modern adult teaching and learning theory and practice (for a detailed discussion, see Qi Gubo et al. 2005, and Qi Gubo et al. *forthcoming*). The course is offered as a selective course. Languages used are both Chinese and English, more or less equally. Course materials include a new textbook (in English; we plan to produce a revised textbook in 2007, in Chinese), so-called Learner’s and Facilitator’s workbooks (in English), and a binder with additional readings (in English and Chinese).

We use a variety of teaching and research tools. In the courses, these range from case study analysis (and comparison of cases), critical literature review, group proposal writing, group field-research reporting, production of an audio-visual (about the field-work), to a puzzle game and role-play. In the field-research, students themselves, with some guidance from facilitators/teachers, select a variety of tools, usually including individual and group interviews, participatory mapping (of the natural resource

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<sup>1</sup> The initiative described here receives financial and technical support from the International Development Research Centre of Canada. We acknowledge the contributions made to our efforts by many colleagues and students from several partner organizations. Opinions expressed are those of the authors only.

base, and/or of social networks and organizational context), participatory ranking exercises, participant observation, group discussion, photographing and videoing, and role play (as a feedback tool). Participatory monitoring and evaluation tools are used through the whole process.

In 2006, based on the COHD course, a similar course was developed in Changchun, at Jilin Agricultural University (JLAU). There the course, adapted from the CBNRM course, is entitled "Participatory Rural Development: an introduction." The first version of the CBNRM course was delivered in the spring semester of 2005. A second run of the CBNRM course took place during winter-spring of 2006. At JLAU, the first run was done in late spring of 2006. Future runs are planned in the coming years at both universities. Recently, several other universities have expressed interest as well to follow in the footsteps of CAU/COHD and JLAU.

Also in 2006, following the first course in JLAU and the second CBNRM course in CAU, we were able to add a student fellowship support component to our efforts. This component aims to encourage MSc and PhD students (and some BSc students in JLAU) to carry out CBNRM/PRD-oriented thesis fieldwork, and practice what they have learned in the courses. This component is allowing –for those students motivated enough and being allowed to by their thesis supervisors, to continue developing shared, additional and more in-depth experiences, mostly in the field and partially in the classroom. It also provides space to explore longer-term commitment to a rural development "project," e.g., links to a long-term research or development effort carried out by CAU, JLAU, or one of their partners.

In participatory curriculum development students play an active role throughout the whole process, from design to evaluation. To practice active and meaningful participation in teaching and learning, is still a novel methodology in China, as it is elsewhere (Taylor and Fransman 2004), although some changes are underway. Introducing, experimenting with, and assessing this methodology in Beijing, and later on, in Changchun (the capital of Jilin province), turned out to be a very enriching experience. The course development experiences are part of a larger COHD-led action research and capacity development initiative entitled "Participatory learning, curriculum development and mainstreaming of CBNRM in higher education in China" (COHD 2004). This initiative aims to contribute to the development and implementation of CBNRM approaches in rural China. The design and delivery of an interdisciplinary CBNRM curriculum (not just a course), through the active involvement of key stakeholders from inside and outside the university, will in the future hopefully be expanded to the level of COHD's Master's and PhD programs. CBNRM field research activities, in turn, are crucial inputs for the evolution of the CBNRM curriculum. In CBNRM, the focus is on practice and on working together, in the class, and in the field.

### **Attuning to reality: training responsive rural development professionals**

"The five-days of living in Ningxia reminded me of a proverb that says, "A special place gives birth to special people." The reality of rural areas varies from place to place. When we saw the sand dunes and the soil walls of Kutuan village for the first time, some of us had an absurd thought: "Why don't they all move into Yanchi County? Maybe it's a solution for their living." But when we saw the enthusiastic peasants of Kutuan village, we changed our minds. We changed our minds, because I felt that they had a common wish of developing their own village. The harmony between villagers impressed me deeply.

During the five-days of our fieldwork, we used participatory research tools to learn from the peasants. We also organized a celebration with them, and their warmth and real feelings touched me deeply. To us who are involved in the CBNRM course, we should consider the things that the peasants pay attention to. In addition, we better guide peasants to use their own power and wisdom to overcome all those development problems they face."

*CAU/COHD MSc student, Beijing, March 2006*

Natural resource management and rural development problems are complex, diverse and in constant flux. Experiences from across China provide strong evidence for this observation. In order to understand and analyze these problems, and to carry out useful interventions and assess alternatives, various researchers are arguing that dynamic and holistic learning processes and methods are required (for a synthesis of this view, Vernooy et al. 2005). A related challenge is to train students to

do research in a new way, combining stronger analytical skills with sound action-focused, practical skills.

Many professors, researchers and practitioners in the field of natural resource management are coming from the bio-physical academic domains and do not have the social science skills and knowledge needed in order to work within such a new, participatory oriented learning framework. The same can be said about many people involved in decision-making and policy-making in these domains. For those working within a participatory research or development framework, it therefore quickly becomes a necessity to foster a multi and inter-disciplinary ways of working. At the same time, for many social scientists, this means developing (better) understanding of the natural sciences. For all, it implies working together with partners from the communities such as farmers and local government officials, as well as other social actors or stakeholders. There is a strong need to speak the same language about rural development. This requires strong commitment and a lot of creativity.

Community-based natural resource management approaches are a response to these new realities. We give a short description of the key features of these approaches (Vernooy et al. 2005, Tyler 2006):

CBNRM research is characterized by basic elements such attention to (more) complex natural and social systems (requiring an interdisciplinary approach, and team-work), a longer time perspective, a diversity of social actors (often labeled as stakeholders), a scale of analysis and interventions beyond the “farm” unit, collective action and a preoccupation about common pool resources, a participatory action and social learning style, and a strong emphasis on empowerment and capacity building.

Conventional research often focuses on one particular resource (water, land or forest) with little thought about the access and use (i.e., social) systems that influence management practices; CBNRM focuses on the interactions among ecology, socio-economics and political elements. From a time duration perspective, conventional research often continues for one or two years, but CBNRM cannot usually deal with the complex questions in such a short period. It requires a longer-term development strategy. In conventional research, the main social actors (or stakeholders) are usually researchers and government. In CBNRM, the main social actors are the users of the resource(s), community people, local farmer/fisher/herder associations, researchers, NGO staff and government staff. Other social actors may also be involved, such as traders. Social and gender analysis are key to understand difference and (address) inequalities.

The learning style of conventional research is mostly a top–bottom approach with little thinking about empowerment and capacity building. CBNRM favors a multi-way learning process, especially using informal methods (peer-to-peer learning), aims to empower people, and supports capacity building and farmer/fisher/herder organization. Collective action and the management of common pool resources are central to CBNRM. But the C of “community” in CBNRM should not be taken as homogeneous and static. The C points more to the perspective: from the local “out” and “upwards” to encompass processes and structures beyond more time-space restricted localities.

With this description in mind, we defined the general objective of the CBNRM course as such: “At the end of the course, participants will be able to use CBNRM concepts, principles and methods for the design of participatory action research proposals relevant to Chinese rural development realities.” There are four (for MSc students), respectively five (for PhD students) interrelated learning objectives, which are addressed in four/five inter-linked modules:

- Defining the key elements of a CBNRM approach based on a review of selected international literature and guidance provided by the course facilitators, resulting in a coherent appreciation of interlinked concepts, principles, and methodology (module 1).
- Able to try out a CBNRM approach in actual rural situations in China based on own experiences, insights obtained from Module 1, and self-selected course field-research assignments (module 2).
- Differentiating between effective and in-effective joint action-learning processes and methodologies, supported by selected literature, a comparative assessment of the field-research assignments carried out in Module 2, and the guidance of facilitators (module 3).

- *For PhD students:* Identifying elements from the international CBNRM literature useful for doing research in the Chinese context, through critical individual reading combined with group-discussion of self-selected references (module 4).

- Able to design a draft CBNRM action research proposal, based on the results of the previous, and with the guidance of facilitators, according to the norms of clarity, coherence, relevance, and feasibility (module 4 for MSc and module 5 for PhD students).

### ***CBNRM Course dynamics***

We now summarize the course to give an idea of its dynamics. In Module 1 (full day classes), students collectively identify some of the main challenges and problems that people in the country's rural areas are facing in terms of use and management of the resource base, livelihoods (social and economic aspects), and involvement in policy processes (political aspects). Based on module 1, and based on an introduction to CBNRM-oriented research efforts in three provinces (Guizhou, Guangxi, Ningxia), students then prepare intensive field-assignments, in small groups, with the guidance of facilitators. The field-visits of five consecutive days, are organized by three groups of students and teachers, help to ground concepts in reality and practice –one of the pillars of a CBNRM approach. In the field, students are confronted (for some of them for the first time ever) with the hardships of living and working in remote and poor rural areas. As their stories indicate, this opens their eyes, minds and hearts.

Modules 3 and 4 and 5 take place again in the class-room, building on the field-experiences. Module 3 is a deep reflection on the fieldwork. Students analyze livelihood and governance aspects in the three research sites, and also address teamwork, co-management, and participatory monitoring and evaluation as key elements of CBNRM. Module 4 (introduced in 2006) is for PhD students only. They self-select a number of articles from the international literature, review them and try to link conceptual and methodological elements to the Chinese reality. It is a demanding module, but well appreciated as it allows for more in-depth study. The last module is on writing a CBNRM action research proposal. In small groups, students produce draft proposals based on the field-visits made early on in the course (in Module 2) and on the insights obtained throughout the course. They present their proposals and received feedback from peers. This dynamic of peer review (a first at COHD) is much appreciated.

### ***Fellowship support***

"From July 20th to August 20th, I spent my first month in the field. Because of my initial impression of the field-site during the CBNRM course, I know my fieldwork will require very hard work and I will also meet many difficulties. However, I have confidence in facing challenges. So I prepared well for my fieldwork, before I left school. Like I thought, during the first days of fieldwork, I had difficulties in understanding the local language. But over time, I learned the local language from villagers and gradually I can understand their meanings as long as they speak slowly. Now I can make good communications with local people. ... However, the field situation also gave me much surprise. First, the scenery of the fields in summer is very beautiful and you can't find any trail of desert. Second, everywhere we go, the people give us an enthusiastic welcome. They encourage me to do my research by providing me with serious answers. All of them do me a good favor. Meanwhile, they expect high standards from me and even expect me to change their living situation. I feel that I take on a heavy responsibility to help them. However, at present, all I can do is to try my best to do my research."

*CAU/COHD MSc student, September 2006*

In 2006, thanks to funding from the International Development Research Centre of Canada, we initiated the Fellowship Support program for conducting PhD and MSc fieldwork, to complement the course. The objectives of the support program are:

- Strengthen participatory action and learning knowledge and skills for community based natural resource management.
- Deepen the understanding of the complexity of Chinese rural realities and of the rural development challenges being faced by local people.
- Contribute to local rural development efforts undertaken through joint action research and development.

The Fellowship support allows students to go the field for an extended period of time, up to 3 months for doing MSc field-research and up to 6 months for doing PhD field-research. At present, the first fourteen awardees are carrying out fieldwork. Although some of them do not find it so easy to be in the field for longer periods of time, they all recognize the importance of learning from rural realities. Real learning requires time, and the establishment of in-depth relationships with farmers, other rural dwellers, and with government staff at the township and county levels.

During this process of fieldwork, the Fellowship management team (made up by staff and students) organizes regular seminars. These seminars bring interested students and staff (thesis supervisors and others) together to exchange experiences and insights, support each other, and identify common challenges, questions and interests. Results from the seminars held so far suggest that they contribute significantly to deepening the learning process. Here is the report of one of the seminars, composed by one of the Fellowship support team members (in November 2006):

“This afternoon, we had the second round fellowship exchange. The good news is that the participants increased to 27, including three teachers. There are 8 PhD and 16 MSc students. At the beginning, we divided in three groups according to participants’ interests, respectively, a policy group, farmers-activities and resource management group, and a farmers’ livelihoods and farmers’ organization group. The main questions of group one focused on the research logic and research methods of the thesis, as there are many discussions and reflections on these questions after they came back from the field. The second group focused on the discussion of the reason of farmers different actions, mainly about resource management and farmers economic activities. The third group focused on the reflection of the thesis itself, such as multi-disciplinarity in the research, how to combine the theory into the fieldwork better, and how to deal with so much complexity and details.

A common question raised by participants concerns the theoretical framework of the thesis. The three teachers gave many good suggestions and comments to this question. The three hours were very short, although all participants said that they harvested a lot. Many doubts and questions need to be discussed further and more clarity obtained. This is hard work and a long process. We need to do much more in the future. “

This process is further forging bonds among students, and among staff and students. It is also instrumental for identity development, with hopefully longer-term results in the making. Shorter-term results are evident as well, for example, as expressed by students taking the lead in a review of all courses given at COHD.

### **Making sparks fly: strengthening students’ comprehensive abilities**

“After the field visit to Shuangyang (in the center of Jilin province), we have known the rural situation more and have understood action research better. Action research is not only a way of studying, but also a way of helping the farmers. Our goal is to help the farmers improve themselves at last. Of course, they need materials, which, still is not enough. We also should help them to be aware of the problem they are facing and help them to get together to become more powerful. We have a long way to go to achieve it.”

*JLAU MSc student, Changchun, June 2006*

For the courses and field-research, we consciously deploy and encourage a variety of teaching and research tools. In the courses, these range from case study analysis (and comparison of cases), critical literature review, group proposal writing, group field-research reporting, production of an audio-visual (about the field-work), to a puzzle game and role-play. In the field-research, students themselves, with some guidance from facilitators/teachers, select a variety of tools, usually including individual and group interviews, participatory mapping (of the natural resource base, and/or of social networks and organizational context), participatory ranking exercises, participant observation, group discussion, photographing and videoing, and role play (as a feedback tool). Participatory monitoring and evaluation tools are used through the whole process.

Active student involvement is central in the courses and the Fellowship support program, from start to end. They take part in discussion, design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and

documentation of the efforts. This includes such activities as peer review of proposals, management and administration of funds, reporting, and organization of seminars and exchange events. A golden rule applied throughout the processes is “no lectures/no lecturing.” We have stuck to this principle in order to encourage learning through active discovery, i.e., learning by doing. In the courses, this has allowed combining theoretical insights that support CBNRM (such as from rural development sociology, agro-ecology, political science) with practice. As one of the students summarized: “I learned a new way of learning by doing. This is a very good method for field-study.” This doing includes such “simple” things as communicating with others, in the classroom, and in the field. As another student said: “In the course, I began to show more enthusiasm and take more initiative. Because I understand that what I have said is listened to carefully by others and recorded. Both the students and teachers seemed to be interested in my speech and they gave me some comments and suggestions.”

The course and related fieldwork has made a beginning of developing the skills for valuing and, more importantly, *using* a CBNRM approach in today’s rural China. This includes elements such as analyzing situations and problems from a people’s (social actor’s) perspective, with a holistic and interdisciplinary scientific approach, combining natural and social science knowledge and methods, and with a critical eye for the socio-economic and socio-political dimensions of natural resource management and rural development at large. Students and staff have improved their abilities to define CBNRM/PRD oriented research questions, and develop (partially) action-focused, CBNRM/PRD research proposals. From a very hard struggle with defining research questions in the first place, students have come a long way.

But the exercises in the class and in the field-practice also opened the eyes to the “darker” side of working for rural development. Many students increased their (theoretical) understanding of participatory action research and CBNRM/PRD, but observed that practicing it adequately is still a major challenge. This is, of course, not surprising, given the short duration of the course and the field-assignment. The focus on the social dimensions of CBNRM/PRD (e.g., Module 3 on effective and ineffective action learning process) contributed to better “seeing the process, troubles, conflicts and influences of participatory rural development.”

A good start has been made, but much more needs to be learned.

“I have completed the CBNRM course from which I learnt a lot, such as learning-by-doing and team work in 2006. I have learnt many of the participatory research methodology and mastered farmer-centered research methods in the field survey. And I know how to share the research results and learning experience with team members and how to promote cooperation through teamwork. I would like to continue along this path.”

*CAU/COHD PhD student, Beijing, April 2006*

### **Creating synergies: sharing quality resources more effectively and efficiently**

Our efforts bring together several organizations. Coordination is in the hands of staff from the College of Humanities and Development/China Agricultural University COHD/CAU), Beijing, and Jilin Agricultural University (JLAU), Changchun. Key partners include the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy, Beijing and Nanning (CCAP), the Guizhou Academy of Agricultural Sciences, Guiyang (GAAS), the non-government organization HOPE, Ningxia, and the Regional Development Research Centre (RDRC)/Yunnan University, Kunming. International support is provided by staff from the International Development Research Centre in Canada and from the UPWARD network of the International Potato Center (CIP).

“Two (persons) know more than one,” serves as one of our principles. This is reflected in the central role of teamwork among students, but in a similar fashion, among the team of facilitators/teachers. The collaborative process is bringing all participants closer together. At the same time, at the level of the coordinating organizations, CAU/COHD, and JLAU staff are strengthening their connections among themselves, as well as between CAU and JLAU. This is reducing professional isolation, and starting to bridge curricular walls. Facilitators-teamwork allows to giving an inter-disciplinary perspective to the courses, and to the fieldwork supervision of students.

Our cooperation is instrumental in bringing different *local* perspectives to the forefront, as project leaders from various agro-ecological sites and socio-economic contexts come together and join

forces. This is enriching for students and facilitators/teachers and provides the opportunity to compare and contrast field-study cases, insights and experiences, and to search for commonalities and particularities. Diversity in this way truly brings more life to the course. Another important advantage of this kind of team-effort is the possibility to engage in collective instead of individual content and process reflection, and to making adjustments shared on an agreed upon decisions. Responsibilities are then carried on multiple shoulders.

Reflecting on the teamwork in a broader innovation perspective, we put forward the suggestion that the horizontally oriented, self-organizing nature of our working and learning groups have much to do with the positive achievements. Assigning tasks and responsibility as much as possible to the practitioners themselves is another key feature. Collegial relationships are the focus of attention, not reporting relationships. This produces knowledge that is “close to the ground,” with an immediate use. Too often still, academic knowledge is disconnected from real life. Too often still, students are seen as cheap labour for teachers. Of course, team-work takes time and effort, and certainly does not always proceed without problems. One of the students complained: “So much team-work!”

## **Conclusions**

So far, the CBNRM (PRD) mainstreaming process, although still at the beginning, has been a very enriching experience for all involved. It certainly has been very labour and time intensive to date, but now that the initial steps have been set, we expect that this intensity will be reduced over time. Careful preparations, a strong team, clear intent, good technical and financial support, ongoing and systematic monitoring, involving students as much as possible, and a continuous focus on learning-by-doing have been important to keep things going and on track. We fully concur with the priority inputs required to deliver high quality earmarked by minister Zhou Ji. The course-working groups and the Fellowship support team have been instrumental in the work done to date. Bringing an interdisciplinary team of colleagues from various organizations together and involving a large number of students are two of the success factors. Insights from theory have served and will serve as guideposts, but it is practice that is telling us what works, what does not, and where improvement can best being made. We are now ready for further curriculum adjustments.

The new courses and related activities, including our collaborative teaching and research management efforts (including functions such as coordination, facilitation, administration, monitoring and evaluation, documentation, and reporting), have opened our eyes, minds and hearts in terms of innovative and inspiring ways to reform Chinese higher education. We have discovered the relevance of CBNRM as a new speciality, in relation to the many potentialities and problems imbedded in the complex and rapidly changing rural realities across China. These realities, through our efforts to “bring” them to the very core of the courses, effectively *create* the curriculum. As a result, we have sharpened our sense of the dynamic (but not easy) roles rural development professionals could play in today’s rapidly changing China. Our involvement in the courses and related field-research is guiding us to a new perspective on our studies and work, central to which are the connections with each other and with the people with whom we cooperate in China’s rural areas across the country. We are now trying to apply this new perspective in our practice.

A good start has been made, but as during any change process, the road is bumpy at times. Challenges that we face range from making further improvement to the courses and the Fellowship support program, expanding our efforts inside CAU and JLAU, and to China’s higher education system at large (many of our challenges are faced by other higher education innovators around the world as well, see Taylor and Fransman 2004). We also wish to obtain more technical and financial support from Chinese sources.

## **Recommendations**

In order to strengthen our efforts, we make some recommendations in three areas: the courses and fellowship support program; mainstreaming in CAU and JLAU; and mainstreaming in the higher education system at large.

Fine-tuning of the courses and the fellowship support program:

- Paying more attention to the use and integration of conventional research methods such as surveys, case studies, life stories/ histories, and situational analysis.
- Increasing the role of the course field-visit (preparation time and actual time in the field), and strengthening links to thesis field-research.
- Strengthening facilitation skills of the facilitation group (both staff and students).

#### Mainstreaming in CAU/COHD and JLAU:

- Strengthen the links of the courses with MSc and PhD dissertation work, and obtaining full respect and support for CBNRM/PRD oriented field-research, including fair and appropriate examinations or evaluations of theses and other papers produced.
- Sharing our learning, and bringing other facilitators/teachers, and key decision-makers on board. Obtaining more financial support.
- Strengthening our learning skills.
- Encouraging (more) staff to do CBNRM/PRD oriented field-research.
- Using *locally appropriate* participatory curriculum development approaches to improve other courses/develop other new courses, as a contribution to building more coherent programs in which components interconnect.
- Maintaining/rejuvenating the engaged and committed working groups that have the space to manoeuvre with flexibility and relative autonomy.
- Supporting new and young(er) “champions” of innovations.
- Enlarging and deepening the links with rural realities and CBNRM/PRD research underway across China. Obtaining more financial support.

#### Mainstreaming in Chinese higher education:

- Sharing good practices, and encouraging adaptation to other sites (universities) in an effective, but also efficient manner.
- Obtaining CAU's, JLAU's, and the Ministry of Education's political and financial support – towards long-term sustainability.
- Further developing an effective and useful assessment approach of CBNRM/PRD mainstreaming outcomes and impacts of the efforts at large (not just of the course).

This is a full agenda. Although so far we have been able to keep up the momentum of change, we face uncertainty about the prospects for a more profound, solid and lasting place for our ideas and ideals. We hope that the minister of education is appreciative of our efforts and our call for more support.

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