

ASEAN Education Cooperation Week Southeast Asian countries are seeking more cooperation with Chinese universities, but challenges remain, as China Daily reporters find out in Guiyang, Guizhou province.

Colleges face foreign challenges

Competition from Western schools one of many obstacles for Chinese programs in other countries

By ZHAO XINYING and YANG JUN in Guiyang

Chinese universities running branches and programs in Southeast Asian nations are facing some unexpected challenges.

Liu Ersi, head of the Bangkok Business School, said running a school overseas is much more difficult than he had expected.

“The costs, the teaching resources, the course design — there are so many difficulties to be overcome, so many problems to be solved,” he said.

The school was set up last year by China’s Yunnan University of Finance and Economics in cooperation with Thailand’s Rangsit University. Located in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, it now has six undergraduate and graduate programs on economics and administration, enrolling 60 students from Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Liu said he had been troubled by a series of headaches, a major one being competition from similar programs sponsored by Western universities.

The school applied to the Thai Education Ministry to set up an international business program a year ago, he said. The program is popular in China and it was expected to succeed in Thailand, too.

“However, when the program was finally approved, we found that universities from Western countries also have such programs at their Thai branches. Their programs are very strong, posing great competition to ours,” he said, adding that the situation made it difficult for his school’s program to recruit students.

Running branches or programs overseas has become a common practice for Chinese universities in recent years. The country now has four institutions and 98 programs overseas, according to Yan Bingchen, an official from the International Cooperation and Exchange Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education.

“A majority of these institutions and programs are in Southeast Asian countries,” he said.

Wang Jiexian, vice-president of Soochow University in Laos, said countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are major destinations for Chinese universities, because China’s education quality is generally higher. The university was set



An educator from an ASEAN country inspects a high-speed railway training center in Guiyang, Guizhou province. Many Southeast Asian nations have begun to recruit railway technicians from Chinese vocational colleges.



Undergraduates from Soochow University in Laos have classes in China.

up in 2011 in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and now has four programs, including Chinese language, computer science and economics.

“China has some advantages in economic development and quality of education compared with ASEAN countries, except for Singapore,” he said. “For this reason, students of these countries are willing to pay to attend local branch schools or programs established by Chinese universities.”

Struggle for balance

But reality is never so simple.

Apart from the competition from the programs of Western schools, Chinese university branches and programs also struggle to maintain financial balance.

Liu, head of the Thai business school, said their courses are taught in Chinese and Thai languages, but now they

find it hard to keep courses taught in Chinese going because of the high cost.

“It’s expensive either to send our Chinese teachers to Bangkok or to hire local teachers who can teach in Chinese. We tried to keep the courses, but I’m afraid they won’t last long,” he said.

Soochow University in Laos, which currently rents a space in a hotel for classes, will complete its first phase of campus construction by April 2016, also has concerns about income and expenses.

Wang said the construction area for the first phase is 6,000 square meters, which is enough for about 300 students.

“But according to our calculations, the budget will only be balanced when at least 1,000 students are enrolled,” he said, adding that they charge each student \$1,500 for tuition per year.

\$1,500

tuition per year for a student at Soochow University in Laos. Classes are currently held in rented hotel space.

Increasing the number of students is not easy, said Wang Ruifang, head of China’s Xiamen University in Malaysia, which started construction in Kuala Lumpur last summer.

He said that in Malaysia, schools like his must chase students, in the hope that they will choose Xiamen out of a crowded field of schools.

“To lure students, we have to improve every aspect of our school and increase its attractiveness,” he added.

But the universities are working to solve these problems. Wang Jiexian said that Soochow University cooper-

ated with domestic enterprises in China, including Pioneer Wood Corp, a materials company in East China’s Jiangsu province where Soochow is based, to obtain a donation to support the construction of the university’s campus in Laos.

Teacher shortage

Running branches and programs overseas means that teachers should be able to teach in both Chinese and the local language, but the number of bilingual teachers is far from adequate, said Yan, the Chinese education official.

Wang Ruifang said teachers at Xiamen University in Malaysia now can teach in Chinese and English languages, but their number is still insufficient and should be increased.

Liu Ersi, head of Bangkok Business School, said the school faces a risk of brain drain, as some bilingual teachers from China are recruited by other educational institutions in Thailand.

“It’s a loss for us because we made painstaking efforts to bring these teachers overseas. But they didn’t stay,” he said.

Wang Jiexian of Soochow in Laos said the university is planning to introduce a localization policy to solve this problem.

“We plan to select some of the best Laotian students at our universities and offer them the chance to study the Chinese language and earn postgraduate degrees in China. And then we will recruit them as teachers for our university in Laos,” he said.

Contact the writer at zhaoxinying@chinadaily.com.cn

Ambassador wants connection with China to go beyond ‘hardware’

By ZHAO XINYING and YANG JUN

Thailand will work beyond the “hardware” level to improve its “spiritual” and cultural connection with China under the ongoing Belt and Road Initiative, said Theerakun Niyom, Thailand’s ambassador to China.

“Mentioning the initiative, people would first think about the Chinese-Thai connection in terms of hardware, such as railways. However, we want to go beyond that and connect people of the two countries through cultural communication, during which process education will play a key role,” Theerakun told China Daily.

“To enhance mutual understanding, we will continue supporting China to establish a Confucius Institute in Thailand, and meanwhile work with the Chinese government to set up more short-term exchange programs and provide more scholarships to undergraduate and graduate students from the other country,” Theerakun said.

He made the remarks while attending the eighth China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week, which was held in early August in Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou province.

Acting as an exchange and communication channel between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the event has been held annually in the city since 2008 and has gathered ambassadors, education officials and heads of education institutions from Southeast Asian countries.

Affection for language

Theerakun said there are about 20,000 Thai students studying in China, and the number of Chinese students studying in Thailand now runs between 40,000 and 50,000.

“The numbers are considerable to Thailand, and these students, I believe, will become the hard core of the bilateral relationship, for their intimate knowledge of and deep affection for the language and culture of the other country where they have studied,” Theerakun said.

He said Thailand and China have a long history of cooperation in the education field, and friendship between people from the two countries has lasted for a long time.

“They have been willing to learn each other’s language and culture and get to know aspects of the other country,” Theerakun said.

“I think the communication between two countries usually starts from learning each other’s language as a tool. After acquiring the tool, the interest in the other country would



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Theerakun Niyom, Thailand's ambassador to China

then expand to more aspects,” he said.

According to Theerakun, 20,000 people in Thailand are now studying the Chinese language, while in China there are also thousands of people studying the Thai language.

Knowing China

Theerakun has been Thailand’s ambassador to China since April, but he said China has never been an unfamiliar nation to him.

“We have been informed of China and its culture since we were young, so Chinese people and their lifestyle are not something new for people in Thailand,” said Theerakun, who was raised in southern Thailand, where he said there were lots of Chinese people and a strong Chinese cultural influence.

“At school, we learned a lot about China from teachers and textbooks, and we even had days off on Chinese Spring Festival,” he said.

The learning has lasted, and Theerakun said he has gradually acquired some Chinese ways of thinking, since his work has always been connected with China over the years. Now working in China, Theerakun said he has more ways to explore and get to know the country even better.

“I have opportunities to know more by having Chinese food, talking to Chinese working staff and traveling around the country,” he said.

Cambodia seeks education assistance from Beijing, official says

By ZHAO XINYING and YANG JUN

Cambodia is looking for broad educational assistance through China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to forge closer relationships with countries along old trade routes, a senior education official said.

“We want to increase the number of Cambodian students who come to study in China, especially for science and technology, as well as for vocational and technical education,” said Pit Chamnan, secretary of state at the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.

“It’s the need of Cambodia’s economic development in the next few years, and the need of our reform process in education,” he said while attending the eighth China-ASEAN Edu-

cation Cooperation Week in China this month.

The China-ASEAN event, held in Guiyang, Guizhou province, has served since 2008 as a culture and education exchange channel between China and the countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

This year’s event gathered dozens of education officials, experts and heads of educational institutions to share education practices and discuss future bilateral cooperation in education.

China began providing scholarships to students from Cambodia in 1998, and about 500 Cambodian students now are studying in China, most for bachelor’s degrees in sought-after majors such as economics, civic engineering, agriculture, medicine and sci-



ence and technology, Pit Chamnan said.

China’s growing economy and rising education quality are attractive to Cambodian students, Pit Chamnan said.

He said he met some Cam-

I think it’s a very good sign that China is attracting students from Cambodia.”

Pit Chamnan, secretary of state at the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport

bodian students studying in Guiyang during his visit to China, and they told him that they were happy.

“I asked them what they thought about the universities and the education in China,

compared with that of other countries. They are quite satisfied,” he said.

“I think it’s a very good sign that China is attracting students from Cambodia, because if the students are satisfied with the Chinese education, they may be good marketing for the education when they come back to Cambodia.”

Cultural similarity

The short distance and cultural similarity is another attraction, Pit Chamnan said.

“It’s easy for Cambodian people to come to China. Food isn’t different and the climate is also quite similar to what we have in Cambodia. Our students won’t have culture shock here,” he said.

However, Pit Chamnan said there are still some challenges

and difficulties facing educational cooperation between China and Cambodia, specifically in financing and language.

Some Cambodian students can’t afford the tuition to study in China, he said. And since English courses have been very common among Cambodian students, they want courses taught in English if they study elsewhere.

“That’s why I often talk to Chinese universities. I think they should have international courses, not only for Cambodian, but also for other international students,” he said.

An increasing number of students in Cambodia, a former French colony, are realizing the benefits of learning Chinese, he said, adding that Chinese is now a dominant

language after English.

“Many Cambodian families, rich or poor, want their children to have courses in it,” Pit Chamnan said. “My son is also studying the Chinese language.”

Pit Chamnan said the Cambodian government has set an ambitious goal of becoming a medium-income country by 2030 and becoming a developed country by 2050.

“The government of Cambodia will put a lot of resources and energy to education because only through education can we realize this goal as soon as possible,” he said.

“That’s also why I think people in Cambodia like the Belt and Road Initiative. It’s a policy to forge a closer and stronger cooperative relationship on education between Cambodia and China.”