

Educating the Next Chinese Business Leaders

MBA

Alumni network pays off for China's foreign graduates

Beijing is wooing masters students with easier access to work permits



Tim Hesler, a recent graduate of the Tsinghua-MIT Global MBA programme

YESTERDAY by Ian Wylie

The reach of their alumni networks is a selling point for most business schools. But in China — where so much business is done through *guanxi*, the Chinese concept of gaining influence through cultivating relationships — those personal connections have even greater power.

Tim Hesler, a recent graduate of the Tsinghua-MIT Global MBA programme, discovered as much after leaving a bag in a taxi at Beijing airport. That bag contained two laptops, his passport, a phone and most of his cash. Having failed to track it down through official channels, Mr Hesler sent out a desperate plea for help to his MBA classmates. Within minutes they were making phone calls on his behalf, pulling security footage of the taxi

rank where he had hailed the cab and working other back channels with taxi companies, police and airport authorities to plead Mr Hesler's case in Chinese.

Just a couple of hours later, he had his bag back. "I'm sure most MBA cohorts have their own tight-knit anecdotes, but I doubt there are many I'd swap for my own," says Mr Hesler.

Keen to launch careers in the world's most powerful economy, a growing number of foreign students are enrolling at [China's business schools](#). On graduation, many hope to enter the rapidly expanding Chinese job market, enticed by the country's competitive salaries and relatively low living costs.

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For international students, access to the Chinese jobs market has until recently been difficult, but a new policy published in January by the ministry of human resources and social security has made it [easier for foreign students](#) to work in China. Students who have graduated within a year with a masters degree or higher from a Chinese university can now apply for an employment licence and a one-year work permit, which can be extended for another five years. It is one of a number of moves by the Chinese government, which has set itself a target of attracting [500,000 foreign students](#) to

study in China by 2020.

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Chinese business schools are relatively young compared to their US and European counterparts, but Mr Hesler argues that this can be a positive. "There's a uniquely frenetic energy among students and administration channelled towards constant improvement

and attentiveness to feedback,” he says of Tsinghua, where Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, Tesla’s Elon Musk and billionaire tech investor Peter Thiel were guest speakers during his two-year programme. Other notable speakers have been Apple’s Tim Cook, Jack Ma, Asia’s richest man, Tencent’s Pony Ma, and Carlos Ghosn, chairman of the Renault-Nissan alliance.

But Mr Hesler, who did his first degree in Indianapolis, admits he was also attracted to the notion that Chinese business school experience would likely be tougher. “Not in the academic sense, but in the life development sense,” he says. “I wanted a challenge that would force me to grow in ways beyond the usual MBA outcomes.”

Another overseas student, Jeff Pi, who graduated from [Ceibs](#), China’s top-ranked business school in the [FT’s Global MBA ranking](#), with an MBA in 2009, remembers looking around his first class and noting that most of his colleagues were from finance or business backgrounds. He, meanwhile, was a music composer from Canada with no *guanxi* or family business connections in China.



Jeff Pi graduated from Ceibs with an MBA in 2009

But after a trip to Shanghai in 2006, he fell in love with the energy of the city. “It really felt like something big was happening, that a huge social-economic shift was under way,”

he recalls. "It was something I really wanted to be a part of, so I looked for the best MBA programme available in China."

Eight years after graduation, Mr Pi finds the MBA still opens doors that would have remained closed had he not gone to a Chinese business school. A competition at Ceibs led to an internship at healthcare multinational Bayer and thanks to China's rapidly expanding job market, Mr Pi enjoyed six promotions in just four years, before he joined the movie business as vice-president of film studio DMG. He is now a partner at Studio Stare in the Jing'an district of Shanghai, where they recently shot a commercial for Airbnb. "This wouldn't have happened at all without a Ceibs MBA," he says.

But not all international students choose to stay in China. Some prefer to make the most of their Chinese connections once they return home. Rory Bate-Williams, who graduated from [Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business \(CKGSB\)](#) in 2014, says studying in Beijing forced him to question what he understood as "normal".



Rory Bate-Williams graduated with an MBA from Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business

"Every day I saw or experienced something new or something I didn't expect," he says. "Thinking big comes naturally from studying in the largest single market on earth. Being at CKGSB opened a window to another world in terms of understanding eastern business principles, learning how to build relationships with Chinese business leaders, and seeing

how vastly different mobile internet and consumer behaviour is to that in the west,” says Mr Bate-Williams, who was mentored during the programme by an entrepreneur who pioneered VoIP (voice over internet protocol) technology.

Now co-founder of Glow Save, a London start-up that auto-switches clients to the best fixed electricity and gas tariffs, Mr Bate-Williams says Chinese connections forged during the MBA are starting to bear some fruit. “It’s given me the confidence, ability and source of ideas to start new ventures and find relevant Chinese partners for them,” he says. “I know I can reach out to the school and be connected to a relevant alumni or contact almost immediately.”

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