

Catch a fast boat to China

Multinationals are offering brisk promotion to graduates who can bridge western and Chinese culture, writes Carly Chynoweth

Graduates fluent in Mandarin and English are highly sought-after by multinational companies — especially those that want to export western goods and services to the burgeoning Chinese market.

Tesco, Unilever and Michael Page International are among those that are recruiting candidates who can get to grips with both Chinese culture and western business practices.

This year Unilever, the consumer goods giant, launched a scheme in which recruits spend two years on the graduate training programme in Britain or America before a final year in China. They can expect to be placed in a management position there and, in the long run, to join the group's cadre of top international managers.

"We are predominantly hiring Chinese nationals who are studying at top schools in America and Britain," said Alan Jope, Unilever's executive vice-president, Greater China. "The challenge for us is that we deal with so much international business in places such as China that we have to be local and speak the local language, but if we are rocking up to, say, Microsoft, we also have to be able to talk to them at that high level."

Although most are Chinese nationals educated in the West — who tend to have the right combi-

nation of language and cultural skills — other graduates are also welcome, Jope said. "If they have the language skills, they should apply. Of our first bunch there are a couple who are not Chinese. We have found some fluent Mandarin speakers who are American nationals who have chosen to join the programme and to at least start their careers in China."

One of the reasons for targeting potential candidates while they are at university is that people with the right mix of skills are in such short supply. There is huge demand in China for local graduates with fluent English and some western business experience.

"The talent pool in China is quite shallow and good managers are highly sought after, so as well as recruiting and developing managers in China [Unilever takes on 80 to 100 local graduates a year] we are expanding our programme."

Steve Ingham, chief executive of the recruiter Michael Page, agreed that competition within China is tough. "The challenge for us is that we deal with so much international business in places such as China that we have to be local and speak the local language, but if we are rocking up to, say, Microsoft, we also have to be able to talk to them at that high level."

This means hiring people



Tesco receives almost 1,000 applications for its graduate scheme in China

fluent in English and the local language and both the local and the western way of business.

Michael Page tends to launch new businesses with expatriate managers before taking on local employees. Unilever, too, wants to maintain its predominantly Chinese profile (99% of staff and 99% of its managers are Chinese). It's just good business, Jope said. "China is the most fantastically

interesting country. It's also complex... the only expats I have spoken to who are genuinely insightful about it have typically been there 15 to 20 years, speak fluent Mandarin and usually have a Chinese spouse."

Graduates seem to be eager to embrace opportunities in China. Last year Tesco had almost 1,000 applications for its scheme. Also, Chinese nationals who have graduated from British universities

are usually keen on careers in their homeland, Jope said.

One Chinese company, Huawei, has just started a scheme giving undergraduates a five-week placement in China between their second and third years. Next month up to a dozen university students studying courses such as electrical engineering, intellectual property law,

international business and Chinese will leave for summer placements at the telecoms company.

The scheme will start with a two-week cultural immersion course covering Chinese working practices and a basic grasp of Mandarin, followed by three weeks at one of its offices in Shenzhen, Shanghai or Beijing. Students are not paid, but Huawei will cover all costs, including flights, accommodation, insurance and meals.

The main aim of the programme, which carries no guarantee of a job when the student graduates, is to promote a broader understanding of Chinese culture at British universities, said Daniela Goldman, director of public policy and communications at Huawei UK.

"The scheme will also provide them with international experience through working in our office in China, which will boost their employment prospects," Goldman said.

Additional reporting: Kamira Jefford

BOOK EXTRACT

Six steps to inspire change

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4. Imagine you have changed. What would the positive outcomes be?

5. Why are those outcomes important to you?

6. What's the next step, if any?

Instant Influence: How to Get Anyone to Do Anything in Less Than Seven Minutes, by Michael Fullerton (Headline Business Plus). Available post-free for £2.99 from The Sunday Times Publishing on 020 277 2234 or thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookbuy

Stepping stone for students

This year nearly 1,000 British and American students will pay about £1,500 for the chance to live and work in China for a month.

While there they will work for Chinese businesses on tasks ranging from analysing how the company could find sales partners in Europe to helping journalists research articles, said Edward

Holroyd Pearce, chief executive of CRCC Asia, which runs the internship scheme.

"Mostly it's working with medium-sized, reasonably traditional Chinese businesses or smaller international companies," he said.

The scheme is not designed to be a route into permanent work, but four or five participants have stayed on as

employees. "And there are others who have used the experience as a stepping stone," he said.

Alex Williams, 21, did not stay after his 10-week placement at China Tong Yin, an investment bank in Beijing — he is due to return to university in September — but gained a lot from the experience, he said. "One project was researching the

merger between IBM and Lenovo for a Chinese company that wanted to know what worked and what didn't," he said.

Most participants see it as a way of strengthening their CVs for job-hunting in Britain, Holroyd Pearce said. "We have had plenty of people say that it has been a real turning point for them in interviews and acceptances," he said.

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If you are interested, please contact: Adrian Whittle with a full CV.

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