



BLAZING A TRAIL

A conversation with **YAN CHUNHUA, Ph.D.,**
President, Lanzhou University



WHAT IS LZU'S BACKGROUND?

LZU is representative of the growth of higher education in northwest China. The university is situated in the country's hinterland, where socioeconomic development lags, and cultural and natural environments differ from those in the east of China. It has faced hardship since its beginning with issues such as the lack of experienced faculty members and staff, inadequate funding, and a rather closed research environment. But we survived, growing from a small-scale, liberal, arts-focused provincial university into a multidisciplinary research university. Our mission is to revitalize northwest China and blaze a path for building quality universities in China's under-developed regions.

WHAT ARE LZU'S UNIQUE COMPETITIVE EDGES?

We are a symbol of northwest China, playing an invaluable role in enlightening and promoting development in the region. Western China is relatively under-developed, but its unique geography, natural resources and industry have created research opportunities. The region's deserts, brushland, plateaus and glaciers, along with sand movement, drought, and alpine climate are all the subject of revealing studies. The artefacts discovered in Dunhuang, and relics of the ancient Silk Road civilization shine a light on the present. With these resources, we have developed research strengths in ecology, grassland study, geoscience and atmospheric sciences, as well as Dunhuang study and ethnology. By linking field data with theories, real-world problems with cutting-edge technologies, and local development with national strategic needs, we have made a series of breakthroughs. According to the Nature Index annual table released in 2019, we are ranked 17th among Chinese universities.

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WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE DURING YOUR TENURE?

The national Belt and Road Initiative, and being selected into the national 'double first-class' initiative have brought new opportunities to LZU, a century-old university. To become a world-class institution, we have set up a three-step development plan, with milestones planned for 2020, 2022, and 2025. Our plans encompass enhancing academic programmes, fostering talents, building faculty teams, research capacity, international collaboration, university management and culture. Particularly, for academic programmes, we will continue strengthening our specialities and fundamental sciences, while developing interdisciplinary subjects and medicine.

These improvements will be enabled by reforms to our human resources management and academic management systems, performance assessment and resource allocation systems, research instrument and platform sharing mechanisms, and the link integrating medical teaching, research and services. I hope these efforts will improve our research capacity and societal impact, and elevate education quality for greater global influence.

HOW DO YOU ACCELERATE TRANSLATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS?

To increase the impact of technology transfer and better serve society, we have established a system to effectively translate research results. With new regulations to manage commercialization, we have

simplified the process and improved services for technology application. The new process has clarified the allocation of profits and maximized benefits for research teams. Meanwhile, research commercialization has become a crucial factor in performance evaluation and promotion, which has dramatically stimulated interest in conducting translational research.

We have also set up an intellectual property and technology transfer centre, with a professional team offering one-stop services for technology transfer, and identification and promotion of intellectual property. We match results with industrial needs, facilitate negotiations, contract drafting, and legal services for licensing and profit allocation. These measures have helped progress research results toward application. Successful cases include a synthesized chemical for pharmaceutical use, a flotation reagent used by a mining company, and co-development of drugs with biotech companies.

OUTLINE YOUR IDEAS TO ENHANCE FACULTY TEAMS?

Talented faculty members are our core resource and a priority investment area. With our geographic location considered a drawback by some, our strategy for attracting and retaining talent is to lure people with high-quality research programmes and career development platforms around our specialities. We have constructed interdisciplinary academic clusters, based on our 'double first-class' subject areas in chemistry, ecology, grassland and atmospheric studies, to encourage resource sharing, coordinated development and innovation. With these robust competitive platforms, coupled with policy and funding support, we hope to attract top talents to enhance our faculty teams.

We also focus on fostering excellence, offering on-the-job training and international exchanges and research

collaboration opportunities to young faculty members. A series of initiatives, targeting young researchers, teachers and postdocs, complement talent programmes for academic leaders to form a multi-level talent support system.

We are also improving our support and service systems, offering sufficient start-up funds and supplementary services, ensuring a friendly research and living environment. With a performance-based compensation and promotion system, we want to motivate our researchers and inspire their creativity.

HOW COULD LZU BECOME A MORE GLOBAL FORCE?

In the last 30 years, LZU has established partnerships with nearly 200 universities in 42 countries and regions, making links across five continents. We will integrate our internal and external resources to build a well-structured global collaboration network. The focus will be on deepening collaboration in research, student exchange and talent sharing with world-class universities, while strengthening dialogue and collaboration with universities in countries along the 'Belt and Road'.

We will integrate globalization into classroom teaching and practical training, offering opportunities for students to study abroad at leading institutions, and internship opportunities at multinational companies and international organizations. We will also enhance our international student training programmes. Similarly, efforts will be made to offer more overseas training for faculty members and invite more talented scholars to give talks or work at LZU. International collaboration in research is another essential aspect. We plan to build international research teams and participate or lead international big science projects. By working with international academic organizations, we also hope to organize some influential conferences to boost our profile. ■

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