Forging a productive future

The University is forging ahead with collaborative projects alongside China's biggest food producers and educators interested in our globally recognised food safety research.

Associate Professor Derek Watson, a senior lecturer in the University's Institute of Business, Law and Tourism, has been investigating how food industry manufacturers can develop a positive food safety culture by adopting his industry-based model 'enlighten'; which puts their own business practices under the microscope and lays the foundations to run more effectively and efficiently.

Return to AboutUS

Professor Watson has been working with organisations globally to improve food safety through cultural change management, and earlier this year welcomed a delegation of Chinese food industry specialists on campus as part of a UK-wide tour to forge collaborative projects and share research.

This has resulted in a five-day return visit to China with potential partnership projects with the University proposed. The plans include setting up a collaborative research centre in cultural management with the Inner Mongolia University, as well as developing a programme between Sunderland's Faculty of Education and Society, and the Mongolian Agricultural University, training their academics in teaching pedagogy.

There were also talks around a scholarship scheme to fund academics from China receiving training in Sunderland.

Professor Watson said: “This was our second trip to China, which was a formalising of relationships. There is clear evidence of support for the work we’ve been involved in during a series of productive visits between our two countries.”

He added: “Our training and research initially caught the attention of The Food Federation of Inner Mongolia, representing 2,000 of China’s largest food manufacturers at the beginning of the year.

“Alongside John Husband, e-learning Director of totrain, a North-East based training business specialising in food safety, I presented our collaborative ‘enlighten’ model to senior executives from the federation, including the billion-dollar milk producer Yili and food producer Mengliang.”

As a result of the presentation, both Professor Watson and John Husband were made honorary members of The Food Federation, this was followed by a delegation of Federation members visiting Sunderland, where a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Sir David Bell, forging closer educational, research and cultural links between the two organisations.

Attending the signing was Ms Zhanchen Wang, Vice President of the Inner Mongolian Tea Artists Association, which sponsored Dr Watson’s recent visit. Dr Watson was joined by Dr Augustus E. Osseo-Asare, Senior Lecturer in Strategy and International Management.

Professor Watson said: “Thanks to all the relationship building over the past year, The Food Federation is now actively promoting our training programs within its food sector.

“This is testament to the work and research that takes place at Sunderland, which is not only commercially viable and attractive on a global playing field, but also feeds back into our own curriculum with live cutting-edge case studies.”

Professor Lawrence Bellamy, Academic Dean, Faculty of Business, Law and Tourism, said: “Building strategic links with China is critical to the future success of the UK economy and it is clear that the specialist area of food safety is one in which our innovation and expertise can make a substantial contribution.

“By linking UK PLC and UK Academia a powerful combination of expertise can deliver outstanding outcomes with the highly regarded Chinese strategic partners we have been working with.”

The enlighten model first caught the attention of The Food Federation of Inner Mongolia, thanks to Dr Watson’s Chinese PhD student Yuan Zhai, who brokered the connection and has acted as a translator for the delegation during their UK visit.
Enlighten

The Enlighten model’s principle aim is to encourage food manufacturing organisations to complete a Food Safety Culture Questionnaire which assesses the level of compliance, best practice and in particular manufacturers’ behavioural short-falls within their organisations. The detailed questionnaire, is handed to all employees, and designed on the four C’s Model: Control, Co-operation, Communications and Competence. Data from the questionnaire is analysed, followed by one-to-one interviews and focus groups, before being validated, and the results presented at each stage to their executive before a final report is produced.

Dr Watson explained: “Having looked at the current literature, Government reports, and food manufacturers practices, we designed a food safety assessment model which traces and triangulates core issues affecting businesses with regards to food safety cultural compliance.

“There are many illnesses and deaths linked to food safety, therefore it’s critical from a moral standpoint that organisations ensure, as far as is reasonably practical, that they develop a positive food safety culture, which is compliant. The enlighten model developed in conjunction with totrai n enables food manufactures to measure its food safety cultural compliance, which is in line with anticipated requirements by the British Retail Consortium’s Global Quality Standards.”

Student Profile: Yuan Zhai

Yuan Zhai’s PhD research focuses on developing a quality management tool used for food safety management systems. It is a strategic and operational framework to close the gaps between the British Retail Consortium Global Food Standards and Chinese dairy producers’ food safety management systems.

Yuan said: “The goal of my research is helping Chinese food manufacturers become internationalised through exporting their products to the rest of the world. It is also in compliance with the Chinese Government’s national strategy of economic growth through growing export.”

About Associate Professor Derek Watson

Associate Professor Watson is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, founder of the Faculty ‘Business Clinic’ and the Doctoral lead for the University’s ‘Research Fridays’ programme. Dr Watson has experience of mapping skills requirements in emerging sectors. He also has extensive links and networks as a result of sourcing and embedding external engagement opportunities across the curriculum, with an international portfolio of clients and contacts, such as the British Cabinet Office, Indian Government Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Dubai Police and Canon International.