Even as a high school student, James Li knew he wanted more than the rote lessons he had received in the Chinese education system. “I felt like if I had received a more complete education, I would have been an entrepreneur or less afraid of taking a less traditional job,” says Mr Li, who attended a Chinese university and now works as a technology support specialist in the city of Hangzhou.

Many Chinese students feel a similar frustration with the hierarchical public education system, which has its historical roots in imperial civil service examinations. From the age of six until 15, students memorise lessons and attend weekend cramming classes, with the aim of passing the gruelling college entrance examination, the *gaokao*. Experts say this rigid model is ill suited to producing the creative thinkers China needs to diversify its economy.

“All the *gaokao* system does is [reward] students who are very good at taking tests,” says Jiang Xueqin, an education researcher and writer based in the province of Sichuan. “But education serves economic purposes — and, right now, China needs more Steve Jobs.”

In the early 2000s, in an attempt to replicate the success stories of entrepreneurial graduates in the west, China began to copy the western education model. Policymakers took inspiration from the business world: China’s economy had grown quickly since the 1980s, in part through a tactic of reverse-engineering technology provided through joint ventures with foreign companies.

Today, the country is criss-crossed with high-speed rail lines, one of many technologies implemented with the expertise of foreign partners. In return, foreign companies were promised access to a growing Chinese consumer market.

Policymakers decided to take the same approach in education, creating joint venture (or JV) universities with western partners.
In 2003, China released its first regulations on setting up JV universities. Considered independent legal entities, they are 51 per cent governed by a Chinese partner and 49 per cent by a foreign university.

For western universities, JVs offer an enticing point of entry into an untapped higher education market, which produces about 8m graduates a year. For China, they are a high-risk gamble with a potentially high pay-off. Through adopting elements of a liberal arts curriculum into its higher education system, it aimed to attract both international teaching talent and students.

“This is a really smart investment for China in how to train students to excel at innovation,” says Yu Lizhong, the chancellor of NYU Shanghai, a partnership between New York University and East China Normal University, set up in 2012.

Besides NYU Shanghai, nine other JV universities have been approved by the ministry of education. Among the earliest were a joint venture between the University of Liverpool and Xi’an Jiaotong University and a collaboration between University of Nottingham and Wanli Education Group, a private Chinese operator. The first cohort from NYU Shanghai graduated in May.

In Jiangsu province, Duke Kunshan University (DKU) — a JV between Duke University in the US and Wuhan University — is preparing to recruit its first undergraduate class seven years after campus construction began.

The model is not without its problems. In recent years, education reform has come into conflict with an increasingly illiberal political climate. Both NYU and Duke codified agreements containing legal provisions for academic independence when they began, including freedom to make senior hires, design their own curriculums, invite speakers and publish freely.

This is an experiment in globalism that is working, but I don’t know if Beijing will want it in the future

CLAY SHIRKY

In recent months, however, fears have grown that China may reverse course under President Xi Jinping. “I would love to tell you that we are some sort of vanguard, but who knows?” says Clay Shirky, an expert on internet technologies at NYU Shanghai. “This is an experiment in globalism that is working. But I don’t know if Beijing will want that kind of thing in the future. All of that makes us feel a bit like a hothouse flower.”

Since President Xi took office in 2012, authorities have extended control over all spheres of civil society. The government has asked universities to stop using imported school textbooks imbued with “western
values”. Mr Xi has called on Chinese universities to become “strongholds of the party’s leadership”. Institutions such as Wuhan University have been subjected to ideological inspections by the state and found guilty of breaches of political discipline.

Faculty and students at NYU Shanghai say state scrutiny has so far not affected the JV. The student body — half Chinese, half international — say they feel as comfortable debating sensitive topics such as the “three Ts” — Taiwan, Tibet and Tiananmen — as they would in the US. But those freedoms do not extend outside the walls of each JV.

“As soon as we leave, we enter a different political space,” says Lena Scheen, a global China studies professor at NYU Shanghai. “So far what is out there has not entered this building, but in China anything can change.”

Denis Simon, DKU’s executive vice-chancellor, agrees: “Joint ventures have flexibility and freedom, while other spaces are tightening. What is the real policy? We have our antennae up.”