

DKU site conditions May 2013

The city of Kunshan in Jiangsu province, China, is one of Duke's partners in the development of Duke Kunshan University (DKU). As part of this collaboration, Kunshan is funding and developing a 750,000 ft.² Phase I campus in the Kunshan Science, Technology, and Education Park to Duke design specifications. This campus is slated to be completed midyear 2014.

In recent months, several Duke faculty members have raised questions about worker safety, living conditions, and wages on the DKU campus site. This has been an important issue for Duke since the project began, and in this case the Duke/DKU team gathered information from several sources, including direct conversation with Kunshan city officials, contractors and subcontractors, and from information gathered by consultants employed by Duke to provide construction oversight. To provide context, the city of Kunshan has some experience with these issues: of the total population of more than 2 million people, approximately 1.2 million are migrants from other areas and provinces who have come to seek work in this relatively prosperous area of Jiangsu province. More than 300,000 of these people work in construction projects in Kunshan.

Many workers on the DKU construction site choose to live in temporary, prefabricated housing close to the site. Individual rooms are shared by up to six workers, or one family unit. As mandated by Chinese law, each worker has at least 3 m² of personal space. Accommodation, including electricity, water and sanitary facilities is provided free of charge to the workers. Some, but not most, subcontractors provide food in addition; otherwise workers prepare their own food in on-site communal kitchens. Visits to these quarters have been made by our consultants over the past year; typically these consultants suggest some changes and modifications including improvement of trash pickup and sanitary conditions. Overall condition of the infrastructure appears to have remained the same over this time period. While most workers choose to live in the accommodations provided, for those who live off site, Kunshan informs us that transportation to the site is provided. Relatively few children live in the dormitories, but those that do are eligible to attend Kunshan schools, even without a permanent residence card.

In general, the workday is nine hours. The workday begins and ends earlier in the summer, in order to avoid the intense summer heat. As is the case in many places, workers are only paid if they work; in other words if rain prevents outside work, those who work outside may not be able to work and will not be paid. Wages vary considerably according to the nature of the job and the skill level of the worker. City officials indicated to us that average wages were 5 to 10% higher in Kunshan than in surrounding cities and towns; this is consistent with information gathered by our own consultants.

Worker safety at the DKU site appears to be average to above average in comparison to other construction sites in the Kunshan area, as witnessed by Duke and its consultants during unofficial observations of other project sites around the city. There have been no serious safety-related accidents reported or seen by Duke, or its consultants, on the DKU project site, and there have been noticeable efforts made by the Kunshan government in the past months to improve safety conditions in problematic areas. For example, the Kunshan government responded to our requests to protect workers from fall hazards by

installing physical barriers and handrails across open shafts, and they have implemented a program to raise temporary electrical construction cabling off the ground, to prevent tripping and shock hazards. However, some issues remain a concern, such as the poor condition of bamboo walking surfaces on steel pipe scaffolding in some locations, and the lack of harnesses for workers to use when working at heights. The primary responsibility for providing safety equipment and training is assigned to the Kunshan contractors who hire the workers. However, the management team (including Kunshan, Duke and its consultants) continues to monitor the project site on a regular basis for safety concerns, record the issues, and makes recommendations for improvements as issues arise.

In conversations with city officials, we note that Kunshan appears to understand Duke's concern that we be part of a project that reflects our core values. We have established a strong partnership, and yet this is also an area in which we should continue to be aware and vigilant. Faculty members with individual concerns or questions about these issues should feel free to contact Vice Provost for DKU and China Initiatives Nora Bynum (nora.bynum@duke.edu), or Duke Project Manager Dudley Willis (dudley.willis@duke.edu), who will be on site in Kunshan for the next year and will continue to identify and report on any safety or housing issues that appear to be problematic.

In closing, we note that Kunshan is a 2010 recipient of the UN-HABITAT Scroll of Honour Award, in recognition of its “innovative approach to granting migrants the right to essential services in the city” such as education, health care, and other public services (<http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=8809&catid=643&typeid=6>).