

Study on Sino-Foreign Educational Collaboration: Status Quo, Challenges, and Strategies

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Abstract: Sino-foreign educational collaborations are pivotal to China's higher education internationalization, and they form an integral part of our educational framework. With over four decades of rapid growth, these collaborations have ushered in an array of top-notch educational resources to China, and fostered a multitude of elite professionals. Yet, alongside its evolution, challenges like ambiguous definitions of quality education, imbalanced talent training structures, asymmetric resource sharing between collaborating institutions, and uncertain external conditions for Sino-foreign educational partnerships have emerged. In light of these challenges, Chinese collaborative educational entities should delineate clear standards for quality educational resources, and enhance the managerial frameworks of Sino-foreign educational partnerships, positioning "quality education" at the forefront of collaborations, bolstering policy support, and consolidating the accomplishments of existing educational collaborations, maximizing the strengths of collaborative education, thereby propelling the global advancement of China's higher education.

Keywords: Sino-Foreign Educational Collaboration; Higher Education; Status Quo; Challenges; And Strategies

Introduction

In the context of economic globalization, the internationalization of higher education is increasingly emerging as a key trend in global tertiary education.^[1] Elevating the openness of higher education and bolstering its global competitiveness have become pivotal to the reform and evolution of tertiary education worldwide. After over four decades of growth, Sino-foreign educational partnerships, representing one facet of China's higher education internationalization, have established themselves as integral to China's educational landscape.

1. Overview of Sino-Foreign Educational Collaboration Policies

Tracing the history of educational collaborations between China and foreign nations, we identify four distinct phases: initial Exploration (1978-1992): Charting the Path for Sino-Foreign Collaborations; Policy Assurance (1992-2004): Streamlining Sino-Foreign Educational Partnerships; Policy Deepening (2004-2010): Rooting in Legal Frameworks; Policy Transition (2010-present): Pivoting from Expansion to Quality Enhancement.

1.1 Initial Exploration (1978-1992): Charting the Path for Sino-Foreign Collaborations

In this era, China's Sino-foreign educational collaborations were in their nascent stage. While explicit collaboration policies were absent, the onset of the reform and opening-up era spurred China to share its educational resources, forging ties with international universities. This period of active exploration and problem-solving paved the way for deeper collaborations in the future.

1.2 Policy Assurance (1992-2004): Streamlining Sino-Foreign Educational Partnerships

In January 1995, the former State Education Commission unveiled the "Interim Provisions on Sino-Foreign Educational Collaboration".^[2] Built upon prior guidelines, this document meticulously set out standards, operational norms, and supervisory responsibilities for such partnerships. By 2002's end, approvals had been granted to 712 Sino-foreign educational entities and projects, highlighting the substantial progress made. The inception of these "Regulations" marked a transition to an era of legislative safeguarding, promoting standardized and legally-aligned management.

1.3 Policy Deepening (2004-2010): Rooting in Legal Frameworks

In this phase, China's Sino-foreign educational collaborations predominantly emphasized a "legal-centric" approach.^[3] Strict legal adherence in education delivery, the establishment of standardized collaboration criteria, and the cessation of non-compliant institutions were hallmarks of this period. These measures, rooted in legal perspectives, not only resolved historic operational inconsistencies but also solidified the legal foundation for such collaborations.

1.4 Policy Transition (2010-present): Pivoting from Expansion to Quality Enhancement

As of April 2022, the Ministry of Education's Sino-Foreign Educational Collaboration Regulatory Information Platform revealed over 2,000 Sino-foreign educational entities and projects spread across 28 provinces. Notably, 1,161 of these are at the undergraduate level or higher. This policy transition phase witnessed Sino-foreign collaborations emphasizing "educational excellence". These initiatives favored depth over breadth, underscoring rigorous oversight, legal compliance, alignment with national strategies, and bolstering the global advancement of Chinese education.

2. The Current Landscape of Sino-Foreign Educational Collaborations

Current research on Sino-foreign educational collaborations in China predominantly revolves around aspects such as geographical distribution, educational tiers, curriculum structures, admission modalities, and degree conferrals. This study integrates data from the Ministry of Education's Sino-Foreign Educational Collaboration Regulatory Platform, offering an analysis up to May 2022.

2.1 Geographical Spread and Academic Levels

Sino-foreign educational collaborations and projects span all 31 administrative units in China, predominantly in Jiangsu, Shandong, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. Their presence tapers from the eastern to the western regions. Academic collaborations are segmented into three tiers: higher vocational education, undergraduate, and postgraduate or higher. Collaborations in higher vocational education constitute 46.2%, undergraduate stands at 42.9%, while postgraduate and above collaborations are the fewest, at 10.9%

2.2 Standalone Legal Entities

Standalone Sino-foreign educational entities, operating as independent institutions, align with national mandates by offering socially relevant programs.^[4] For undergraduate courses, top disciplines include engineering, science, and economics, with popular majors like mathematics and applied mathematics, economics, computer science, biology, and environmental science. Typically spanning four years, programs adopt 2+2, 3+1, or 4+0 training structures. Irrespective of the format, students can secure dual degrees. Admissions are either purely gauged on college entrance exam scores or a mix of these scores and holistic evaluations.

2.3 Incorporating International Educational Resources

Sino-foreign educational collaborations bolster the national development strategy, chiefly by harnessing premium global educational resources to nurture top-tier, globally competitive talent. At the 2018 National Education Conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping underscored the essence of rooting education in Chinese values, amplifying international openness, forging high-caliber global collaborations, and consequently, enhancing China's educational impact. To date, these collaborations have honed millions, spanning 11 academic disciplines, from engineering to history.^[5] Moreover, the courses on offer are increasingly delving into avant-garde scientific and technological realms.

2.4 Collaborations between Chinese and Foreign Institutions

Since China's reform and opening-up, Sino-foreign educational partnerships have evolved from inception to proliferation, and now to refinement. From over 1,100 collaborations in 2010, the number has surged to over 2,300, encompassing all 31 provincial regions. Notably, collaborations at the undergraduate level or above tally up to 1,253.

3. Challenges in Sino-Foreign Educational Collaborations

3.1 External Uncertainties Surrounding Sino-Foreign Collaborations

The global landscape is volatile, with unforeseen shifts in international dynamics, rendering the environment for Sino-foreign educational partnerships uncertain. This is evident as international dynamics hinder Chinese students from studying abroad, straining cross-border educational exchanges. Teachers face barriers in collaboration and research, as they're restricted in both inbound and outbound mobility. Traditional teaching methodologies fall short, and emerging approaches are upending the educational status quo.

3.2 Resource Disparities in Dual-Institution Collaborations

Collaborations between Chinese and foreign institutions present challenges. Striking a balance between domestic and international entities with analogous levels, standards, and goals can be arduous. Some local administrations, in their zeal to import

foreign educational prowess, may overlook disparities, pouring in resources and thereby unintentionally creating imbalances. Such imbalances manifest in discrepancies between academic rankings and disparities in financial commitments.

3.3 Ambiguity in Defining “High-Quality” Educational Resources

The emphasis on introducing top-tier foreign educational resources is a recurrent theme in China’s policies on Sino-foreign collaborations. Yet, what truly constitutes “high quality” remains ambiguous. While policy documents seldom offer a clear definition, the academic community, too, is split. Whether it’s tying up with elite global institutions, embracing advanced pedagogies and equipment, or as some suggest - an amalgamation of leading-edge educational standards and resources globally - the precise delineation is unclear.

^[6]This lack of clarity might lead to the adoption of seemingly elite resources that are, in reality, merely superficial.

3.4 Structural Imbalance in Nurturing Top-tier Talent

Sino-foreign educational partnerships aim, in part, to foster China’s elite talent. Yet, structural imbalances are evident in this pursuit. Disciplinary disparities are apparent: while collaborations span 11 subjects, engineering, management, and arts are predominant, making up 70.46% of the total. Disciplines like education, medicine, and law are notably underrepresented. Geographically, collaborations are concentrated in affluent coastal provinces in the east, dwindling as one moves westward. Another stark imbalance surfaces in talent mobility. While these initiatives provide invaluable learning opportunities, post-completion, over half the students venture abroad for further growth. Conversely, the influx of international talent into China remains modest.

4. Countermeasures and Recommendations

4.1 Consolidate Current Achievements in Sino-Foreign Collaborative Education and Maximize Its Strengths

With its evolution from inception to proliferation and refinement, Sino-foreign educational partnerships face challenges amidst changing global dynamics. These challenges include limited resources for potential collaborations and faculty mobility restrictions. To tackle these, it’s essential to consolidate the progress made in such partnerships. Further, we must lean into the Ministry of Education’s supervision mechanisms for continuous monitoring. We should also harness the strengths of these collaborations, establishing a sustainable “localized internationalization” mechanism. This involves integrating international best practices, harmonizing them with domestic strengths, and capitalizing on the fusion of technology and education. ^[7]Building a digital collaborative platform can foster information-sharing and bolster connections between domestic institutions and the global academic realm.

4.2 Define Criteria for High-Quality Educational Resources and Enhance the Governance Mechanisms for Sino-Foreign Collaborative Education

The integration of premier foreign educational resources is pivotal to the sustainable growth of Sino-foreign educational collaborations. ^[8]Hence, national standards for such integrations should be defined, taking into account regional nuances. Each region should critically evaluate the relevance and adaptability of these imported resources. Moreover, education authorities need to streamline governance structures, ensuring policy support for these collaborations. A comprehensive supervision ethos is imperative, underpinned by a robust evaluation framework. Institutions with profit-driven motives, offering subpar education, must be firmly countered. A reinforced sense of responsibility among educational entities and all tiers of governance is crucial, supplemented by enforcement and penalty mechanisms tailored for these collaborative ventures.

4.3 Amplify Policy Support and Encourage Sino-Foreign Collaborative Education in the Central and Western Regions

At the policy level, while national directives have been introduced to advocate the spread of Sino-foreign collaborations in education to the central and western regions, these regions still lag. Partly, the developmental phase of the universities in these regions may not exert a significant pull for premier foreign educational resources. Moreover, the overall economic stature of the central and western regions doesn’t match that of the eastern areas, making ample funding for such initiatives challenging. The overarching goal for these regions isn’t just to diversify options for students but to align with the grand vision of China’s tertiary education progression, preparing a talent reservoir for future regional advancements. Hence, there’s an imperative for the nation to further bolster policy support for these regions.

4.4 Prioritize “High-Quality Education” in Collaborative Ventures and Uphold the Core Mission of Imparting Values and Cultivating Talent

One of the paramount hurdles in sourcing premier foreign educational resources is identifying the right collaborative partners.

Aligning institutional and departmental rankings emerges as an immediate concern. Solely targeting elite global universities restricts collaborative avenues. Sino-foreign educational partnerships should be more encompassing, emphasizing talent development over mere rankings. Realistic assessments, focusing on specialized strengths and tangible outcomes in quality education, should guide partnerships. Concurrently, these collaborations must steadfastly cling to their foundational ethos of imparting values and nurturing talents, propelling the global stride of China's educational landscape.

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