

# Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education in Universities: Pathways to High-Quality Development in the New Era

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## Abstract

Under the background of the new era, Sino-foreign cooperative education, as an important vehicle for China's education opening-up, faces significant opportunities and challenges for high-quality development. This study, based on policy guidance and practical issues, systematically analyzes the current development status of Sino-foreign cooperative education, highlighting core problems such as structural imbalances, the lack of dynamic mechanisms, and insufficient governance innovation. Specifically, these issues manifest in the regional distribution imbalance ("Strong East, Weak West"), the disconnection between academic structures and national strategic needs, and the increasing risks brought by changes in the external environment. In response to these problems, this paper proposes seven optimization strategies: (1) Strengthening the integration of concepts; (2) Enhancing policy guidance; (3) Optimizing academic structures; (4) Improving management mechanisms; (5) Innovating cooperation models; (6) Improving faculty and curriculum quality; (7) Expanding international cooperation networks. It emphasizes the need for a systematic integration of resources, promoting digital transformation, and deepening governance reforms to build a flexible and efficient Sino-foreign cooperative education system.

## Keywords

Sino-foreign cooperative education;  
New era; High quality; Challenges;  
Strategies

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## 1. Introduction

Under the background of the new era, Chinese President Xi proposed at the 2018 National Education Conference that China should expand educational openness and carry out high-level cooperative education with world-class resources. The "Opinions of the Ministry of Education

and Eight Other Departments on Accelerating and Expanding Educational Opening-up in the New Era" also emphasized that the government should fully play its coordinating role and promote educational cooperation at various levels<sup>[1]</sup>. Sino-foreign cooperative education is a unique form of collaboration in China's higher education

system. It refers to educational and teaching activities conducted by Chinese and foreign educational institutions within China, in compliance with the law, with Chinese citizens as the primary target for enrollment <sup>[2]</sup>.

Over the past 40 years since the reform and opening-up, Sino-foreign cooperative education has evolved from being a supplement to China's higher education system to becoming an important component of it, with remarkable achievements. Nevertheless, with the emergence of a new global paradigm, the development of Sino-foreign cooperative education in China is confronted with a series of novel challenges and pressures amidst the confluence and collision of Eastern and Western economic and cultural forces. These include severe pressure on enrollment, increased difficulty in student management, various restrictions on the introduction of high-quality overseas resources, obstacles to aligning research with international standards, and bottlenecks in expanding overseas cooperation partners, among others.

On one hand, the number of studies on Sino-foreign cooperative education is currently limited, with most focusing on related policies and countermeasures. There is a shortage of research on the opportunities and strategies for the high-quality development of Sino-foreign cooperative education in the context of the new era. The existing research lacks sufficient data analysis and statistical support, making its guidance on the high-quality development of Sino-foreign cooperative education not very evident. Since the pandemic of COVID-19, the international situation has been volatile, providing new opportunities but also raising new demands for Sino-foreign cooperative education in the new era. Therefore, it has become especially important and urgent to explore the opportunities and response strategies for the high-quality development of Sino-foreign cooperative education under the current circumstances.

Moreover, it holds significant practical value in guiding universities with Sino-foreign cooperative education programs and institutions in positioning themselves, defining their educational objectives, and improving their education levels. So, this study introduces a new evaluation model and, based on statistical data, analyzes the challenges faced by Sino-foreign cooperative education programs under the new era. Based on this, the paper proposes possible solutions.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of Sino-foreign cooperative education has its historical origins. In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), and according to relevant agreements, the country implemented conditional opening-up in five sectors of education, including higher education services. To regulate educational activities, the "Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education" of the People's Republic of China came into effect on September 1, 2003 <sup>[3]</sup>. According to these regulations, Sino-foreign cooperative education is a specific type of educational activity, and its establishment must be approved by administrative authorities in accordance with the regulations and their implementation measures. The cooperation between China and Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan is also managed according to this framework. This has imposed restrictions on the management agencies and implementing entities, making Sino-foreign cooperative education a key component of China's new era of educational opening-up.

In terms of organizational structure, Sino-foreign cooperative education primarily covers three types: cooperative projects, non-independent legal entity cooperative institutions, and cooperative universities with independent legal status. These forms exhibit diversity in their operation, including one-to-one specialized cooperation or one-to-many networked cooperation, single-campus or dual-campus management models, and various forms of awarding diplomas, whether single or joint. From the perspective of its development history, Sino-foreign cooperative education began in the early 1980s, during China's initial period of reform and opening-up, marking the preliminary exploration of higher education opening-up. In 1995, the state issued the "Interim Provisions on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education," which provided a legal basis for such activities. After 2003, the development of Sino-foreign cooperative education in China has gained momentum, steadily moving onto a track of continuous and healthy development.

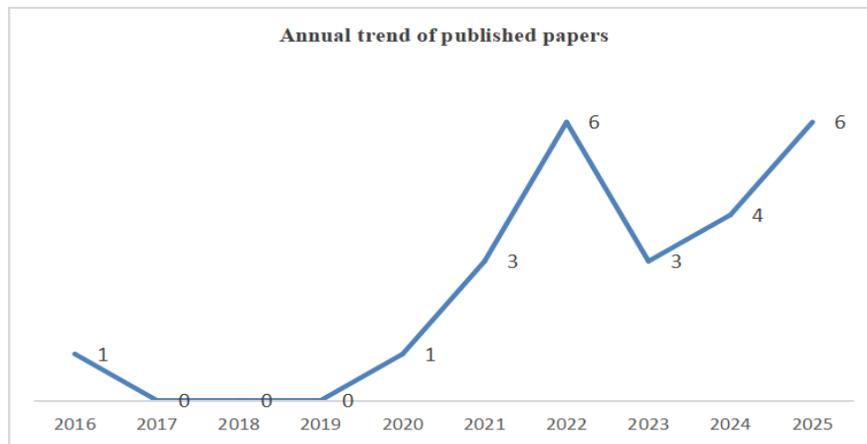
With the implementation and development of Sino-foreign cooperative education models in China, numerous challenges have emerged. Many universities are still exploring and struggling to navigate these challenges. Currently, research on the development of Sino-foreign

cooperative education is primarily focused within China, with limited international discussion on the subject. By conducting advanced searches in CNKI core journals using keywords such as “Sino-foreign cooperative education,” “high quality,” and “development,” we found only 19 related research papers. The trends in published research and the distribution of key topics are shown in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**.

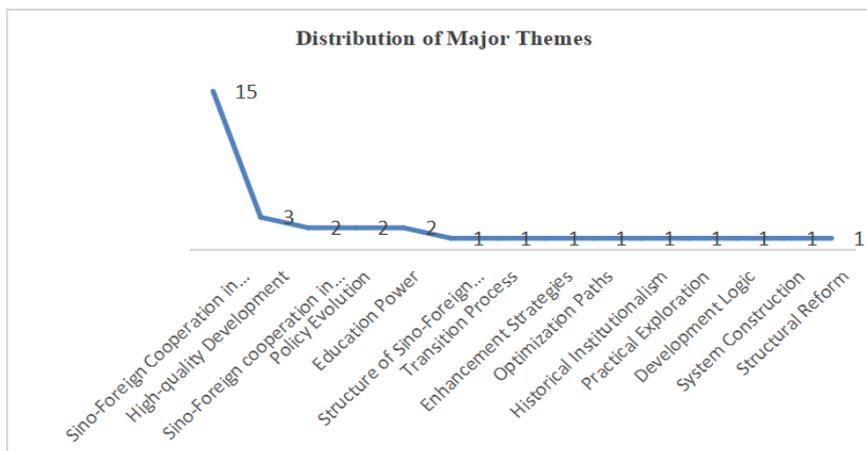
In terms of the opportunities brought by the new era for the high-quality development of Sino-foreign cooperative education in domestic universities, Lin believes that both the opportunities in the era and the policy support from the Party and the state have brought new opportunities for the development of Sino-foreign cooperative education in Chinese universities <sup>[4]</sup>. These have played a fundamental and leading role in the external communication mechanisms and internal educational activities of Sino-foreign cooperative education. **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** show that, currently, the number of

high-quality research papers related to the high-quality development of Sino-foreign cooperative education in China is limited. Related research began to emerge in 2016, peaked in 2022, and may remain at a similar level in 2025, indicating that in recent years, the issue of high-quality development of Sino-foreign cooperative education has attracted academic attention.

Regarding the themes of publications, the research is relatively balanced, mainly focusing on enhancement strategies, the evolution process, educational structure, optimization strategies, development paths, and system construction. For example, Li and Chen studied the dynamic changes and optimization strategies of the discipline and professional structure in Sino-foreign cooperative education in higher education <sup>[5]</sup>. They found that optimizing the structure of disciplines and majors in Sino-foreign cooperative education requires strengthening forward-looking planning, leveraging the guiding role of the market, and promoting scientific positioning to form



**Figure 1.** Annual trends in the publication of research on Sino-foreign cooperative education.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of key topics in research on Sino-foreign cooperative education.

distinctive advantages. Lin and Ling pointed out that there is still a gap between the actual operation of Sino-foreign cooperative education and the goals set by policies <sup>[6]</sup>.

Specifically, the relative lag of policy supply, the need to further improve the effectiveness of policy implementation, and the need to deepen the reform of the evaluation system for cooperative education are issues that need to be addressed. Wang and Guo analyzed the issues and optimization paths of Sino-foreign cooperative education in “Double First Class” universities, proposing strategies for innovation in talent training models, building high-level talent training systems, ensuring teaching quality in Sino-foreign cooperative education, and enhancing innovation capabilities <sup>[7]</sup>. Lu and Guo analyzed 199 undergraduate and higher education institutions nationwide, and found that the scale of educational institutions continues to expand, but more than 70% of them are concentrated in the eastern region, reflecting an “East Strong, West Weak” pattern <sup>[8]</sup>. Li and Chen compared the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, the Yangtze River Delta, and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, pointing out that the Yangtze River Delta has the most Sino-foreign cooperative education projects (356), while the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area focuses mainly on graduate-level education (41.18%), highlighting regional development differences <sup>[9]</sup>.

In addition, we conducted statistics on Sino-foreign cooperative education projects and institutions published by the Ministry of Education’s Foreign Cooperation and Exchange Supervision Network. We found that the projects and institutions approved at this stage does not fully align with the national focus on the fields of engineering, agriculture, medicine, and science. Overall, there is a trend where projects in management and economics are more common, with about 30% of the existing projects in these fields, while there are fewer projects in agriculture, medicine, artificial intelligence, big data, and internet engineering. Furthermore, there is limited cooperation with world-class universities in the current projects. Regarding regional distribution, the number of Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions is not evenly spread. For instance, Guangdong, a large economic and educational province, has far fewer Sino-foreign cooperative education projects compared to

similar provinces.

In summary, although there has been significant progress in research on Sino-foreign cooperative education in Chinese universities, there are still pressing issues that need to be addressed. The main problems lie in the fragmented nature of current research, which lacks a systematic approach. Most studies focus on localized issues, without providing a comprehensive analysis of the interconnected mechanisms related to regional imbalances, disciplinary mismatches, and quality assurance. Additionally, there is an over-reliance on static descriptions, with limited discussion on dynamic mechanisms. Research on how Sino-foreign cooperative education can respond to emerging challenges such as digitalization and artificial intelligence has yet to be explored in depth. On top of that, while there are numerous policy interpretations, there is a lack of innovation in governance pathways, and key issues such as how to design mechanisms for high-quality resource introduction and how to establish a Sino-foreign collaborative research and innovation system remain without actionable solutions.

In view of these challenges, this study will analyze and discuss how to effectively improve the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education under the new era, establish a framework for problem analysis in Sino-foreign cooperative education, and propose practical measures that can be implemented to address new challenges and seize new opportunities.

### **3. Challenges of Sino-foreign cooperative education**

Under the background of the new era, the high-quality development of Sino-foreign cooperative education faces multiple challenges, which are primarily concentrated in three dimensions: systematization, dynamism, and innovation.

#### **3.1. Structural imbalance and disconnection from strategic needs**

Currently, Sino-foreign cooperative education in China faces issues due to a lack of systematization, resulting in difficulties in resource integration. According to the data from the Ministry of Education’s Foreign Cooperation and

Exchange Supervision Network, the regional distribution of Sino-foreign cooperative education projects presents a pattern of “Strong East Regions, Weak West Regions,” with more than 70% of institutions located in the eastern region, while the introduction of high-quality resources in the central and western regions lags significantly behind. This imbalance not only affects educational equity but also hinders the implementation of the country’s regional coordinated development strategy. Chinese President Xi emphasized the need to expand educational openness at the National Education Conference, but in practice, there are fragmented issues at the policy execution level, and the coordination mechanisms among different departments have not been fully streamlined<sup>[10]</sup>.

Furthermore, in the existing Sino-foreign cooperative education projects, the proportion of economic and management-related projects is as high as 30%, while projects in urgently needed fields such as new engineering disciplines, cutting-edge medicine, and smart agriculture account for less than 20%. This discrepancy in disciplinary structure represents a significant misalignment with the key development areas outlined in the “China Education Modernization 2035” plan. It is also worth noting that in collaborations with foreign universities, the involvement of top 100 global universities is less than 15%, indicating a dual shortfall in both the “quality” and “quantity” of high-quality educational resources, which urgently requires breakthrough.

### **3.2. Lack of dynamic mechanisms and rigid educational models**

Sino-foreign cooperative education in Chinese universities lacks the development of dynamic mechanisms, making it difficult for the educational models to adapt to the rapidly changing external environment. The profound changes in the global political and economic landscape, particularly in the post-pandemic era with restricted international exchanges and rising technological protectionism, pose severe challenges to traditional cooperation models. The “Opinions of the Ministry of Education and Eight Other Departments on Accelerating and Expanding Educational Opening-up in the New Era” clearly call for “innovating the models of educational opening-up.” However, the current educational institutions show clear shortcomings

in their ability to respond to challenges such as digital transformation and risk prevention. For example, the development of online teaching resources is lagging behind, and the exploration of hybrid teaching models is still in its early stages. These issues highlight the rigidity of existing educational models and the need for a more flexible, adaptive approach that can keep pace with changing global circumstances.

### **3.3. Insufficient innovation in governance pathways**

There is a clear lack of innovation in governance pathways for Sino-foreign cooperative education in China, which limits the improvement of educational quality. Currently, the evaluation system places too much emphasis on scale indicators and lacks a scientific assessment of the internal aspects of educational development, such as the quality of talent cultivation and contributions to research innovation. Some institutions also exhibit a phenomenon of “focusing on reporting rather than development,” where the internationalization level of the faculty is uneven, and the effectiveness of the quality assurance system needs to be strengthened. These issues reflect the need to shift the governance mechanism from “management” to “governance,” aiming to stimulate the endogenous motivation of educational institutions. Sino-foreign cooperative education in the new era is not only at a strategic opportunity phase but also at a critical stage of overcoming challenges.

Party-building work is the fundamental guarantee for Sino-foreign cooperative education in the new era, while faculty development is key to the high-quality growth of such programs. However, many universities currently face challenges such as weak Party-building in Sino-foreign cooperative education projects or institutions, high public attention but low credibility, numerous intentions but insufficient planning and development. Many universities find themselves in a passive position, with the role of the main institutions not fully activated. In terms of faculty, especially foreign faculty, the proportion often fails to meet the standards, and there is a tendency for the same team to serve multiple systems, leading to difficulties in project implementation and obstacles throughout the process.

## 4. Optimization paths and strategies

Building upon the preceding analysis, this chapter will focus on exploring the optimization paths and strategies for advancing the high-quality development of Chinese-foreign cooperative education in universities. It aims to construct a development framework that is both grounded in the Chinese context and effectively integrates international experience, providing practical solutions to address current challenges.

### 4.1. Strengthen conceptual integration and enhance policy guidance

On the premise of adhering to national educational policies, it is essential to integrate advanced Western concepts of individual development. Gradually, a dual-track operational mechanism should be formed, which relies on Chinese universities as the foundation, with partner institutions participating. This mechanism should focus on improving language proficiency and enhancing professional teaching capabilities. The educational approach should be student-centered, with a teaching model that is led by instructors but encourages active student participation. This open teaching philosophy aims to foster an environment where both teachers and students work collaboratively to achieve educational goals.

The government should further improve relevant policies and increase support for Sino-foreign cooperative education. On one hand, through policy guidance, the government should encourage more world-renowned universities to collaborate with Chinese universities, particularly in disciplines that are urgently needed for national development, such as science, engineering, agriculture, and medicine. On the other hand, there should be a stronger policy tilt towards the central and western regions of China, promoting a more balanced distribution of educational resources. For example, a special fund could be established to support universities in the central and western regions in developing Sino-foreign cooperative education projects, attracting high-quality educational resources to these areas.

### 4.2. Optimize the discipline structure and improve the management mechanism

Universities should adjust the discipline structure of Sino-foreign cooperative education based on

national development strategies and social needs. Cooperation projects in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, big data, and internet engineering should be strengthened. At the same time, attention should be paid to the development of fundamental disciplines such as agriculture and medicine, cultivating interdisciplinary talents that meet the country's needs. Market research and discipline assessments can be conducted to determine key areas for development and ensure that resources are allocated effectively.

Besides, universities should also establish and develop a comprehensive management mechanism for Sino-foreign cooperative education. In terms of student management, it is essential to strengthen cross-cultural education, developing students' international perspectives and cultural inclusiveness. A student management system, with joint participation from both Chinese and foreign institutions, should be established to address students' academic and life-related challenges in a timely manner. In terms of teaching quality monitoring, a collaborative Sino-foreign teaching quality evaluation system should be developed. Regular assessments of teaching curricula, faculty qualifications, and student feedback should be conducted to ensure continuous improvement in teaching quality.

### 4.3. Focus on resource integration and innovate cooperation models

According to the relevant provisions of the Ministry of Education's "Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education," Chinese universities should focus on introducing high-quality educational resources from foreign institutions. Therefore, a strategy of resource integration should be implemented. Universities should strengthen cooperation and exchange with foreign partners, sharing resources and engaging in communication on teaching philosophies, methods, and other aspects between Chinese and foreign faculty members. Universities should also collaborate in developing high-quality courses, co-authoring textbooks suitable for students in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, and setting common teaching, assessment, and other standards. Joint research and teaching activities with partner institutions should also be organized.

At the same time, in response to changes in the

international situation, universities should actively explore innovative Sino-foreign cooperative education models. For example, by utilizing internet technology, universities can carry out online cooperative teaching, academic exchanges, and other activities, breaking the constraints of time and space. This would also enhance collaboration in research with foreign universities, establish joint laboratories and research teams, and improve research innovation capabilities, thereby achieving mutually beneficial outcomes.

#### **4.4. Cultivate a strong faculty team and improve curriculum development**

Efforts should be made to enhance the teaching quality of universities by building a strong and balanced faculty team, combining experienced, middle-aged, and young faculty members, with mentorship and guidance through a “teaching, helping, and supporting” approach. In the meantime, it is essential to improve curriculum development by strengthening the university’s own advantageous disciplines, forming distinct professional features, and developing high-quality courses. The design of teaching programs should focus on interdisciplinary and cutting-edge fields. Moreover, the evaluation of project teaching quality should be strengthened by setting clear objectives, conducting regular internal discussions, and organizing online video discussions with partner institutions. This will ensure the continuous improvement of Sino-foreign cooperative education quality.

#### **4.5. Vigorously expand outreach**

On one hand, domestic universities can engage in exchanges with similar or sister institutions, sharing educational experiences and learning from each other’s international teaching practices. On the other hand, universities should actively expand their exchanges with overseas educational institutions. This can be achieved through various channels to connect with foreign institutions, making full use of the opportunities presented

by the “Belt and Road” initiative. Universities should strengthen exchanges and cooperation with institutions in countries along the Belt and Road, and encourage qualified universities to explore setting up overseas campuses or branches.

### **5. Conclusion**

As a crucial vehicle for the opening up of education, the high-quality development of Chinese-foreign cooperative education is not only vital to its own advancement but also profoundly influences the process of China’s educational modernization. This study systematically analyzes the core challenges faced by Chinese-foreign cooperative education in the new era and proposes an optimization pathway centered on systematic integration, dynamic responsiveness, and governance innovation. The research indicates that achieving high-quality development in Chinese-foreign cooperative education necessitates breaking through the constraints of traditional thinking and establishing a more flexible and efficient management system and operational mechanism. Future development of Chinese-foreign cooperative education should place greater emphasis on three key aspects as follows:

- (1) Strengthening strategic guidance to better align educational practices with the broader national development agenda;
- (2) Promoting digital transformation to enhance the effectiveness of educational endeavors through modern information technology;
- (3) Deepening international collaboration to amplify the global influence and discourse power of Chinese education amidst expanding openness.

It is particularly worth emphasizing that addressing specific issues, such as optimizing resource allocation and innovating collaborative models in the context of the new era to provide more targeted guidance for practice, represents the next focal direction of this research.

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