
Research on Cross-border Collaborative Education Model of Private Colleges in Hainan Free Trade Port

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Abstract: The development of Hainan Free Trade Port has created policy incentives and growth opportunities for higher education opening-up. Cross-border collaborative education programs empowered by institutional characteristics have become a key strategy for private universities to overcome resource constraints and achieve differentiated development. Against the backdrop of Hainan's education opening-up policies and through practical case studies of local private universities, this paper defines the core principles of cross-border collaborative education driven by institutional characteristics. It analyzes the practical foundations and existing challenges faced by private universities in implementing such programs, and proposes a cross-border collaborative education model featuring “institutional foundation, resource integration, innovative approaches, and multi-party collaboration.” Supporting implementation strategies are also developed, aiming to provide theoretical references and practical frameworks for private universities in Hainan to deepen cross-border collaboration and support the Free Trade Port initiative through institutional characteristics.

Keywords: Hainan Free Trade Port; private universities; school-based characteristics; cross-border collaborative education; model construction

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1. Introduction

The “Master Plan for the Hainan Free Trade Port” explicitly proposes building an “International Education Innovation Island for Science, Engineering, Agriculture, and Medicine,” encouraging universities to engage in high-level international exchanges and cooperation. Platforms like the Lingshui Li an International Education Innovation Pilot Zone have positioned Hainan as a vanguard in opening up higher education to the world. As a vital component of Hainan's higher education system, private universities—thanks to their flexible operational mechanisms, strong market adaptability, and distinctive academic strengths—have become key players in cross-border educational collaboration within the free trade port. However, compared to public universities, private institutions face inherent disadvantages in international educational resources, funding, and faculty quality, making it challenging to develop core competitiveness through homogeneous cross-border cooperation models^[1].

The distinctive features of private universities, formed through long-term educational development, represent their professional strengths, accumulated resources, and unique characteristics that set them apart from other institutions.

Against the dual backdrop of “education openness + industrial agglomeration” in Hainan Free Trade Port, leveraging these institutional strengths to enhance cross-border collaborative education—by integrating specialized programs, local resources, and international educational demands with the Free Trade Ports industrial development—has become a practical solution for private universities to overcome resource constraints in cross-border education. This approach also serves as an essential pathway for them to support the internationalization of the Free Trade Ports industries and build institutional brands. Currently, some private universities in Hainan have implemented such practices. For instance, Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology has developed international premium courses based on its specialized programs in intelligent technology and rehabilitation medicine, exporting these courses to Southeast Asia. This initiative has become a “Hainan model” for vocational education globalization, providing practical references for enhancing cross-border collaborative education through institutional strengths. In this context, researching cross-border collaborative education models empowered by private universities distinctive features holds significant practical value for promoting high-level openness of Hainans private universities and supporting the construction of the Free Trade Ports International Education Innovation Island^[2].

2. The core connotation and practical foundation of school-based characteristics empowering cross-border collaborative education

2.1. Core connotation

Under the Hainan Free Trade Port framework, cross-border collaborative education with institutional-specific strengths in private universities is a model that integrates domestic and international educational resources. This approach leverages the ports industrial demands, centers on distinctive academic programs and local advantages, and follows the principles of “exporting unique features, importing resources, mutual empowerment, and collaborative development.” It establishes a comprehensive system encompassing cross-border talent cultivation, specialized resource sharing, industry-education innovation, and cultural exchange. The core strategy positions institutional characteristics as the bond and competitive edge for cross-border collaboration, moving beyond traditional models that prioritize superficial exchanges over substantive integration. This model achieves alignment with international education standards, connects with the ports industrial needs, and synergizes with global resources. By exporting distinctive resources to enhance private universities global influence while importing international resources to refine their specialized training systems, it ultimately achieves dual empowerment: elevating educational quality and driving cross-border education-industry development in the free trade zone.

2.2. Realistic basis

Policy incentives provide institutional safeguards for cross-border collaboration. The Hainan Free Trade Port has introduced a series of policies to support universities in international exchanges and cooperation, allowing high-level overseas vocational colleges to operate independently and supporting the establishment of Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions. The Lingshui Lian International Education Innovation Pilot Zone has further achieved “mutually selected courses, mutually recognized credits, and jointly negotiated management,” creating a relaxed policy environment and collaborative platform for private universities to enhance their cross-border cooperative education with school-based characteristics^[3].

The distinctive school-based features form the core foundation for cross-border collaboration. Private universities in Hainan have developed distinct characteristics, such as Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technologys intelligent technology and shipping law programs, and Sanya Universitys fintech and health care industry programs. These programs closely align with the industrial development needs of the free trade port. Through long-term educational practices, they have accumulated high-quality resources for industry-education integration and practical teaching, becoming the core assets for cross-border collaboration.

Industrial demands are charting the course for cross-border collaboration. The Hainan Free Trade Ports key sectors—tourism, modern services, and high-tech industries—are all embracing global trends, creating a pressing need for versatile professionals with both local industry expertise and international expertise. Meanwhile, neighboring regions like Southeast Asia show strong interest in the trade ports specialized educational resources, providing private universities with both market opportunities and strategic direction to develop cross-border cooperative programs through their unique institutional strengths.

Through practical exploration, Hainans private universities have accumulated valuable experience in cross-border collaboration. For instance, Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology has developed 10 industry-education integrated international courses, launched the international version of XuetangX Online, and exported them to countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. These courses have benefited over 20,000 students across 14 countries, establishing a tripartite cross-border cooperation model integrating “curriculum-platform-cooperation.” This model provides replicable and scalable practical experience for other institutions.

3. Existing problems of cross-border collaborative education empowered by private universities school-based characteristics

3.1. Insufficient exploration of school-specific features and inadequate cross-border collaboration alignment

Some private universities have only explored their institutional characteristics at the disciplinary level, failing to align with the internationalization demands of the free trade port industry and the features of the global education market. This has resulted in a disconnect between their distinctive resources and cross-border collaboration needs. For instance, certain institutions have not upgraded their specialized programs for internationalization, making their curriculum content and teaching standards incompatible with overseas requirements. Additionally, some universities institutional characteristics lack strong ties to the free trade port industry, hindering the integration of cross-border collaboration and industry-education partnerships, thereby reducing the effectiveness and sustainability of their international cooperation efforts^[4].

3.2. The cross-border collaboration model is monotonous, and the distinctive empowerment is superficial.

Currently, cross-border collaborative education initiatives in private universities primarily involve short-term faculty-student exchanges, foreign faculty recruitment, and joint programs, resulting in a monotonous model that fails to fully leverage institutional strengths. Most institutions have not integrated distinctive disciplines, practical resources, or industry-education integration systems throughout the entire cross-border collaboration process. Instead, they treat institutional features as mere “embellishments,” lacking a deep integration model that combines “specialized programs with cross-border talent development” or “unique resources with international industry partnerships.” Consequently, such collaborations remain at a “superficial and low-level” stage.

3.3. Limited resource integration capability and weak cross-border collaborative support system

Private universities face limited operational funding and lack dedicated cross-border education investments, hindering the internationalization and promotion of their distinctive institutional features. Their international resource integration capabilities remain underdeveloped, with most collaborations being point-to-point partnerships rather than leveraging the free trade port platform to consolidate high-quality resources such as the Lingshui Lian Pilot Zone and overseas industrial parks. Furthermore, the shortage of faculty members with both specialized expertise in institutional characteristics and global teaching competencies has become a critical bottleneck for empowering cross-border collaboration through institutional strengths.

3.4. Insufficient collaboration between universities, local governments and enterprises, and lack of industrial synergy in the free trade port

Some private universities cross-border collaborative programs lack synergy with the free trade ports industries and government platforms. They fail to align their institutional strengths with the international demands of key sectors like cross-border e-commerce, tourism and wellness, and smart manufacturing, resulting in a disconnect between educational initiatives and industrial development. Moreover, the collaboration mechanisms between these institutions and the free trade ports government agencies and industrial parks remain underdeveloped. This hinders their ability to leverage government platforms to connect overseas industrial resources with educational needs, preventing the empowerment effects of their unique strengths from benefiting the free trade ports industries. Consequently, the dual objectives of “educational collaboration + industrial empowerment” remain unfulfilled.

4. Building a cross-border collaborative schooling model with school-based characteristics

In response to the operational realities of private higher education institutions in Hainan and the development needs of the Free Trade Port, we have established a distinctive cross-border collaborative education model. This model, centered on institutional characteristics, guided by Free Trade Port industries, supported by cross-border resources, and aimed at mutual empowerment, adopts a “one-core, dual-drive, three-dimensional, four-integration” framework. It achieves deep integration of institutional features with cross-border collaboration and precise alignment with Free Trade Port industries^[5].

4.1. One core: school-based characteristic core leadership

Private universities should center their cross-border collaboration on distinctive programs, local resources, and institutional strengths. All cooperative efforts should be anchored in these unique strengths, achieving the goals of “specialized programs setting the direction, distinctive resources providing support, and innovative models building the brand.” For instance, joint training programs for cross-border healthcare professionals could leverage their specialized nursing programs, while cross-border R&D and practical training collaborations could capitalize on their expertise in intelligent technologies. This approach ensures that institutional strengths become the defining hallmark and competitive edge of cross-border partnerships.

4.2. Dual drive: free trade port industry + international education demand

Powered by the dual drivers of Hainan Free Trade Ports industrial globalization needs and global education market demands, this initiative precisely addresses the international talent requirements in key sectors such as tourism and wellness, cross-border e-commerce, and digital economy. It also aligns with the demand for high-quality vocational education and applied learning resources in neighboring regions like Southeast Asia. Through school-based innovation, the cross-border collaborative education model not only supports local industrial development but also meets the standards of the global education market.

4.3. 3D: talent cultivation + resource output + industry-education innovation

We will establish a cross-border collaborative system with three key dimensions: talent cultivation, resource export, and industry-education innovation, to fully empower the institutions distinctive features. In talent development, we will implement Sino-foreign joint programs, credit transfer, and dual-degree initiatives for specialized majors. For resource export, we will internationalize and export our institutions premium courses, practical training standards, and teaching resources. Regarding industry-education innovation, we will collaborate with overseas universities and foreign enterprises in the free trade zone to develop cross-border industrial projects and technological innovations, achieving cross-border synergy between education and industry.

4.4. Four integrations: integration of local characteristics with international standards + integration of local characteristics with industry needs + integration of on-campus and off-campus resources + integration of educational programs with cultural exchanges

The implementation of the four key integrations is pivotal to realizing the model: Integrating school-based distinctive curricula with international vocational education standards and industry norms to enhance the professionalism of cross-border collaboration; Aligning the schools unique training system with the international job requirements of the free trade port industry to achieve coordinated education and industrial alignment; Combining campus resources with educational and industrial assets from overseas universities and enterprises to establish a cross-border resource-sharing framework; Integrating cross-border education with the international dissemination of Hainans local culture and the free trade ports open culture to facilitate mutual learning in educational cooperation and cultural exchange.

5. Implementation path of cross-border collaborative schooling with school-based characteristics

5.1. Deeply explore school-based characteristics and achieve international transformation of characteristic resources

Private universities should systematically identify and develop their institutional characteristics, adapting them to the internationalization needs of free trade port industries and global education standards through localized and internationalized reforms. First, they should focus on specialized disciplines by aligning with international industry standards and job requirements in free trade ports. This involves revising talent development plans and developing bilingual and international courses. For instance, Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology has fully translated signature courses like Maritime Law and Intelligent Control Systems and Engineering into English to meet international standards. Second, institutions should integrate practical teaching resources to establish international training platforms and resource libraries, transforming industry-education collaboration cases and training standards into high-quality cross-border cooperation materials. Third, they should explore Hainans local culture and free trade port features, incorporating Li and Miao ethnic cultures, tropical wellness programs, and free trade port policies into their institutional identity. This creates a cross-border cooperation resource system that combines “institutional characteristics + free trade port features + international adaptability.”

5.2. Innovating cross-border collaboration models to build a distinctive empowerment system

Breaking away from the traditional single model of cross-border cooperation, we rely on school-based characteristics to build a diversified and in-depth cross-border collaborative education system. First, we establish a talent cultivation model of “curriculum export + joint training”, exporting distinctive international courses to overseas universities while launching Sino-foreign joint training programs such as “3+1” and “2+2” to achieve cross-border education with school-based characteristics. Second, we create a practical cooperation model of “specialized majors + overseas training”, jointly building cross-border training bases with foreign enterprises in the free trade port and overseas partner institutions, enabling students to participate in cross-border industrial project practices. Third, we explore a brand export model of “specialized resources + vocational education going global”, leveraging the geographical advantages of the free trade ports RCEP and “Belt and Road” initiatives to export school-based vocational education standards and teaching models to neighboring regions such as Southeast Asia, thereby building a distinctive brand for cross-border education in private universities.

5.3. Integrating diverse resources to strengthen cross-border collaboration support

Private universities should leverage their institutional strengths to integrate diverse resources from domestic and international governments, academic institutions, and enterprises, thereby overcoming resource constraints. First, they

should strengthen university-local collaboration by proactively engaging with the Lingshui Li an International Education Innovation Pilot Zone and the Free Trade Ports industrial authorities to secure policy support and funding subsidies, while utilizing government platforms to access high-quality overseas educational and industrial resources. Second, they should deepen university-enterprise partnerships by collaborating with multinational and foreign-related enterprises in the Free Trade Port to jointly develop cross-border educational programs, establish training bases, and transform corporate cross-border projects into teaching cases. Third, they should promote inter-university collaboration by establishing in-depth partnerships with overseas applied universities and vocational colleges, enabling faculty exchanges, mutual credit recognition, and resource sharing to address the shortage of international faculty in private universities.

5.4. Building a distinctive faculty team to enhance cross-border collaborative teaching capabilities

The faculty team serves as the cornerstone for cross-border collaborative education, requiring the development of a “triple-capable” team that combines school-specific expertise, international teaching skills, and industry practice experience. First, a dual approach of recruitment and cultivation: select key faculty members from specialized disciplines to participate in bilingual teaching and international curriculum development training, while organizing overseas exchanges at partner institutions. Simultaneously, recruit outstanding foreign educators, international professional certification holders, and free trade port industry experts as adjunct faculty. Second, establish a faculty exchange mechanism: facilitate two-way collaboration between domestic institutions and foreign partners, enabling domestic teachers to engage in overseas industry practices and international experts to contribute to specialized course instruction. Third, form cross-border collaborative teaching teams: organize units based on school-specific disciplines, comprising core faculty members, international educators, and industry experts to jointly develop curricula, implement project-based teaching, and drive research innovation.

5.5. Aligning with free trade port industries to achieve cross-border synergy and industry-education integration

The internationalization of free trade port industries serves as a key orientation for cross-border collaborative education, enabling synchronized development between educational synergy and industrial progress. First, aligned with the free trade ports key industrial layout, the school integrates its distinctive features with global demands in tourism and wellness, cross-border e-commerce, digital economy, and smart manufacturing to cultivate targeted cross-border talents and foster industry partnerships. Second, through collaboration with free trade port industrial parks and multinational enterprises, cross-border industry-education integration projects are implemented. For instance, partnerships with overseas wellness companies leverage the schools specialized wellness programs, while e-commerce talent development collaborates with Southeast Asian firms through its cross-border e-commerce expertise. Third, the school incorporates the free trade ports cross-border industrial policies and international industry standards into its distinctive teaching approach, cultivating interdisciplinary talents with both institutional professional competencies and free trade port industry insights, achieving precise alignment between cross-border collaborative education and the free trade ports talent demands.

6. Conclusion

The development of Hainan Free Trade Port has created unprecedented policy opportunities and growth potential for cross-border collaborative education among private universities. As the core competitive advantage of private institutions, their institutional characteristics serve as the key to overcoming resource constraints in international education and achieving differentiated development. The cross-border collaborative education empowered by institutional characteristics is not merely a simple combination of institutional features and international cooperation, but rather an integration of these characteristics throughout the entire collaborative process. This approach achieves deep integration with international educational standards, the industrial demands of the free trade port, and high-quality overseas resources, ultimately

establishing an educational model characterized by “institutional foundations, mutual empowerment, and coordinated development.”

Private universities in Hainan should leverage their unique institutional strengths to develop distinctive characteristics and pursue internationalization. By innovating cross-border collaborative models and integrating diverse domestic and international resources, they can build specialized faculty teams that align with the Free Trade Ports industrial development. Through these institutional strengths, private universities can elevate their cross-border collaboration from superficial exchanges to deep integration, and from homogeneous development to distinctive competition. This approach not only enhances the quality and global influence of private universities but also provides talent support and model references for the Hainan Free Trade Ports International Education Innovation Island initiative. Ultimately, this fosters a mutually beneficial relationship between private universities high-level openness and the Free Trade Ports development, achieving shared growth.

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