Cross-Border Higher Education between the UK and China: Policy, Practice, and the Future of International Collaboration

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare the international higher education collaboration strategies of the United Kingdom and China, with a focus on Transnational Education (TNE) and Sino-foreign cooperative education. It aims to identify key policy frameworks, institutional practices, and collaborative models shaping international engagement in both countries.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Based on a qualitative document analysis, the study systematically reviews national policy documents, institutional reports, and academic literature. Comparative case studies, including Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) and UK TNE initiatives, are used to evaluate the structural and strategic dimensions of international education collaborations.

Findings – This paper identifies significant differences in the two countries' approaches: the UK adopts a market-driven, institution-led model that emphasizes autonomy and diversification, while China employs a centrally planned strategy aligned with national modernization goals. Both models show strengths—such as enhanced graduate mobility and economic impact—but also face challenges, including regulatory constraints in China and financial over-reliance on international tuition in the UK.

Research Implications – In the management of international education, the findings provide critical insights for policymakers and institutions aiming to enhance cross-border collaboration. The paper offers strategic recommendations to improve regulatory efficiency, diversify markets, promote mutual recognition, and ensure quality assurance across transnational programs.

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I. Introduction and Literature Review

Globalization has profoundly transformed the global higher education landscape over the past several decades. Traditionally characterized by national-focused institutions catering primarily to domestic populations, higher education now increasingly operates within a global framework. As knowledge, economies emerge and labor markets evolve, countries recognize the strategic importance of internationalizing their higher education systems to meet global demands (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This shift encompasses not only the mobility of students and academic staff but also the cross-border delivery of education services, transnational partnerships, and the establishment of overseas campuses.

Transnational Education (TNE) is a popular model for higher education globalization. TNE encompasses all types of higher education study programs, sets of courses, or educational services in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. It can take various forms; its structure varies across importing countries. In Egypt, Pakistan, and Greece, TNE fills gaps in domestic education systems, offering better infrastructure and pedagogical innovation. Student-centered learning, flexible curricula, and access to UK faculty enhance the student experience. In Egypt, TNE partnerships led to regular staff development workshops and improved institutional standards. In Pakistan, collaborations also include incubation centers and career development services.

As a significant education exporter, the UK is widely regarded as a pioneer in the internationalization of higher education. Historically rooted in prestigious institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge, the UK's higher education system has evolved to embrace global engagement as a strategic priority. According to the Higher Education Academy (2023), international students account for a significant proportion of total enrolments, contributing extensively to the UK economy through tuition fees, living expenses, and cultural exchange. The UK's International Education Strategy (IES), launched in 2019, underscores the nation's ambition to increase education exports to £35 billion annually by 2030 (UK Government, 2024). Concurrently, the UK's institutions pursue transnational education (TNE) partnerships globally, encompassing dual degrees, online learning, and franchised programs (British Council, 2024).

In contrast, China's journey toward higher education internationalization experienced a comparatively short but strategically significant development. In China, international exchange and cooperation is regarded as one of the four basic roles or functions of higher institutions(Runchi Qian, 2024). China is traditionally known as a major source of international students studying abroad, but it has become a significant importer of education in recent years, particularly in the realm of higher education and specialized training. Underpinned by national modernization policies, the Chinese government prioritizes Sino-foreign cooperative education to integrate global best practices and elevate its domestic educational standards. Regulatory frameworks such as the Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education institutionalize this approach, encouraging joint ventures between Chinese and foreign universities (Wang et al., 2021).

Comparative studies of the UK's mature, market-driven model and China's state-directed cooperative framework are limited. Existing research often addresses country-specific strategies without juxtaposing these

distinct paradigms. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing a comparative analysis of policy frameworks, institutional practices, and collaborative models, thereby informing best practices and policy recommendations.

II. . Research Objective

This research aims to:

(1) Analyze the historical evolution and current frameworks governing international collaborative education in the UK and China.

(2) Compare the strategies and models adopted by both nations.

(3) Assess the economic, academic, and social impacts of these international collaborations.

(4) Provide policy and operational recommendations to enhance future collaborative education initiatives.

III. Methodology

A qualitative document analysis methodology is adopted, systematically reviewing national policy documents, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed academic studies. Comparative analysis techniques are employed to synthesize data from authoritative sources, including the UK Higher Education Report (2024), British Council TNE Report (2024), Chinese regulatory frameworks, and case studies such as Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) and various UK TNE models. Tables and figures support data visualization and comparative assessment.

IV. Findings and Analysis

4.1 UK Higher Education System

The UK's higher education system comprises 131 universities, enrolling approximately 2.4 million students, with 566,715 being international students contributing £25.8 billion to the national economy (UK Higher Education Report, 2024), as shown in table 1.

Table 1. UK Higher Education Student Demographics (2022/23)

Category	Number of Students
Total Students	2,400,000
Undergraduate Students	1,800,000
Postgraduate Students	600,000
Full-time Students	2,000,000
Part-time Students	500,000
Students Aged 30 or Older	500,000
International Students	566,715

Source:The data in the Table 1 cited from the UK Higher Education Report, 2024

Table 2. TNE Collaborative Provision by UK Institutions

Provision Type	% of Institutions Offering
Dual/Double Degrees	58%
Online/Distance Learning	43%
Franchised/Validated Degrees	35%
International Branch Campuses	19%

Source:The data in Table 2 cited from Transitional Education Partnership Report (2024)

4.2 Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education in China

China's approach involves establishing Sino-foreign cooperative universities under national policy frameworks, operating nine such institutions nationwide (Wang et al., 2021). These universities integrate foreign curricula, English-medium instruction, and joint degree programs.

Table 3. XJTLU Graduate Outcomes (2021)

Outcome	% of Graduates
Pursued Postgraduate Studies Abroad	85%
Enrolled in Top 10 Universities	33%
Enrolled in Top 100 Universities	85%

Source:The data in table 3 cited from XJTLU's 2021 annual report on careers and jobs

Case studies such as XJTLU demonstrate the success of Sino-foreign cooperation in enhancing graduate mobility and academic standards. According to XJTLU's 2021 annual report on careers and jobs, totally 85% students studied abroad are enrolled in top 100 Universities. Among them, 33% of all students were enrolled into top 10 universities to continue postgraduate studies, as shown in table 3.

V.. Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals profound structural and strategic differences between the UK and Chinese models of international higher education. The UK has liberalized; market-driven approach fosters innovation, institutional competition, and diverse international partnerships. Institutions leverage their autonomy to develop transnational education (TNE) programs, build overseas campuses, and customize collaborative models. This enables universities to diversify their revenue streams and expand global brand presence. However, a heavy reliance on international tuition fees exposes UK institutions to financial volatility in response to global crises and shifting geopolitical landscapes.

Statistical trends reveal that in 2022/23, over 566,000 international students studied in the UK, accounting for nearly 25% of total enrolments. Revenue from international student tuition reached approximately £25.8 billion, representing over 30% of higher education export value (UK Government, 2024). The UK's International Education Strategy (2019) emphasizes expanding educational exports to £35 billion by 2030, a goal nearly achieved ahead of schedule (UK Government, 2024). The strategy highlights enhancing institutional autonomy, supporting diverse TNE models, and strengthening research collaborations. The rapid growth of TNE provisions highlights the sector's strategic adaptation, with 58% of UK HEIs now offering dual/double degrees and 43% delivering online or distance learning programs. 35% of UK HEIs cooperate through providing Franchised or validated degrees, and 19% of them establish the international branch campus (IBC). 15% of them adopted different partnership models with other foreign universities. However, emerging challenges, including intensified global competition, Brexit-related uncertainties, and concerns over student experience, necessitate more strategic diversification and quality assurance reinforcement.

In contrast, China's centrally coordinated model prioritizes national modernization and capacity building through state-regulated Sino-foreign cooperative education. Regulatory oversight ensures that collaborative institutions align with national development goals while adopting international pedagogical best practices. Data from XJTLU, a leading Sino-foreign university, indicate that 85% of graduates pursue postgraduate studies abroad, reflecting successful capacity-building outcomes. Enrollments in top 10 and top 100 global universities (33% and 85%, respectively) further validate the efficacy of China's model in fostering global competencies among domestic students (XJTLU, 2022). It also exhibits the advantage of combining international curricula, English-medium instruction, and dual-degree offerings (XJTLU, 2022). Despite challenges in teaching capacity and regulatory processes (Hui, 2023).

However, the restrictive regulatory environment can constrain institutional autonomy, slow down decision-making, and hinder the scalability of collaborative initiatives. Challenges such as complex bureaucratic approvals for joint programs, limitations on foreign faculty recruitment, and barriers to cross-border research collaborations underscore the need for regulatory reform. Data indicate that research outputs from Sino-foreign institutions, while growing, remain a small proportion of national research publications, suggesting untapped potential for international collaborative research.

Overall, both systems benefit substantially from internationalization, yielding enhanced academic standards, economic contributions, and global reputational gains. Nonetheless, continuous adaptation of policy frameworks, diversification of strategies and collaborative models remains essential to address systemic limitations and sustain growth in international higher education.

VI. Recommendations

6.1 For China

To advance the effectiveness and scalability of Sino-foreign cooperative education, the following policy and operational recommendations are proposed:

Expand Cooperative Initiatives in Underdeveloped Regions: National incentives, such as financial grants and infrastructure development support, should encourage partnerships in underserved regions, promoting equitable educational access and balanced regional development.

Strengthen Collaborations with High-Ranking Foreign Institutions: Strategic selection of reputable foreign partners will enhance educational quality and global recognition. Priority should be given to collaborations with top-tier universities to ensure knowledge transfer and international credibility.

Enhance Legal and Regulatory Frameworks: Streamline bureaucratic processes, reduce approval bottlenecks, and introduce clear guidelines for joint program establishment, degree recognition, and foreign faculty recruitment. Modernizing regulatory frameworks will facilitate faster and more effective collaborative initiatives.

Promote Research Collaboration: Establish dedicated funding schemes and institutional incentives to support joint research projects with foreign partners. Data-sharing agreements and joint supervision models should be expanded to encourage co-publication and research innovation.

Establish Bilateral Mutual Recognition Agreements: Government-level negotiations should focus on establishing bilateral agreements that facilitate the mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications, easing student and faculty mobility between China and partner countries.

6.2 For the UK

To maintain global leadership in international higher education, UK policymakers and institutions should consider the following strategic actions:

Diversify TNE Markets Beyond Traditional Regions: Institutions should explore emerging markets in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America to reduce reliance on traditional source countries like China and India. Market research and government-supported educational diplomacy can assist in identifying and accessing new regions.

Enhance International Student Support Services: To address retention challenges and ensure positive student experiences, universities should invest in comprehensive support systems encompassing academic advising, mental health services, career counselling, and post-study work opportunities. Data from the Higher Education Academy (2023) highlight that institution with robust student support services report higher student satisfaction and retention rates.

Promote Collaborative Research Partnerships: UK institutions should leverage their strong research capacities to establish reciprocal research collaborations with emerging economies. Joint research centres, co-publication incentives, and integrated postgraduate supervision models will enhance mutual benefits and capacity building for partner institutions.

Strengthen Quality Assurance Mechanisms: Expanding the remit and resources of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to monitor TNE delivery will ensure consistent quality standards across diverse delivery models and international locations, safeguarding the reputation of UK higher education globally.

Develop Risk Mitigation Strategies: Given the reliance on international student revenue, institutions should formulate contingency plans to address potential market disruptions, including scenario planning, financial diversification, and the establishment of institutional reserves.

By implementing these recommendations, both China and the UK can enhance the sustainability, quality, and global impact of their international higher education collaborations.

VII. Conclusion

International higher education collaborations serve as strategic instruments for economic growth, academic excellence, and cultural diplomacy. The UK and China exemplify distinct but effective models in promoting cross-border education. Institutional autonomy, robust quality assurance, and synchronized policies are critical for the sustained success of international higher education partnerships.

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