

# The Unspoken Curriculum: How Holistic Student Experience Defines Quality in Cross-Border Education

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study explores the factors contributing to the higher quality of students in Sino–foreign cooperative universities (SFCUs) compared to traditional Chinese universities. It examines how curriculum design, teaching methods, international exposure, and institutional support influence students’ academic, personal, and professional development, while advancing a student-centered perspective on the quality of transnational education (TNE).

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – A mixed-methods strategy was employed, combining surveys with semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving students, alumni, and faculty from four Sino–UK collaborative institutions. Document analysis of curricula, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs, and institutional reports provided contextual depth. Qualitative data were thematically analysed and triangulated with quantitative findings to enhance validity.

**Findings** – The study shows that SFCU students benefit greatly from international curricula, diverse faculty, and English-medium instruction, which strengthen critical thinking, language proficiency, and cross-cultural competence. Graduates exhibit strong employability, with many pursuing postgraduate study abroad or employment in multinational firms. Nonetheless, challenges persist in language and academic support, curriculum localization, and administrative coordination, which limit the full realization of program potential.

**Research Implications** – Findings highlight the value of adopting a constructivist lens to evaluate TNE, focusing on students’ lived experiences rather than purely academic indicators. For policymakers and practitioners, results suggest that sustainable collaborations demand more than curriculum transfer does; they require integrated support systems, contextualized teaching practices, and efficient administration. Future research should pursue longitudinal and comparative studies to assess the long-term impact of SFCUs and strengthen international higher education models.

**Keywords:** Transnational Education (TNE), Higher Education Quality, Constructivism Learning Theory, Student-centric Perspective, Curriculum Integration

**JEL Classifications:** I23, I28

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## **I. Introduction and literature review**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Over the past four decades, globalization has significantly accelerated the expansion of international higher education (Maringe et al., 2012), facilitating the worldwide circulation of educational resources (Rumbley & de Wit, 2011). The conventional model of students traveling abroad for study is gradually being replaced by a new paradigm in which universities extend their programs directly to students' home countries through cross-border campuses and institutional partnerships (Cai et al., 2013).

The establishment of Sino-foreign cooperative universities serves multiple purposes within the context of China's higher education internationalization. Firstly, these institutions expand access to international education by enabling Chinese students to obtain globally recognized degrees without the need to study abroad, thereby reducing financial and cultural barriers. Secondly, they enhance the quality of higher education in China by introducing advanced curricula, innovative teaching methods, and modern management models from leading global universities. Thirdly, a central objective is the cultivation of globally competent graduates who possess strong bilingual proficiency, cross-cultural communication skills, and the ability to adapt to the demands of the international labor market (Zhao, 2021). Fourthly, these universities promote joint research collaboration and innovation, strengthening China's role in global knowledge production. Fifthly, they align with national strategies on education opening-up and talent development, while also supporting initiatives such as the Belt and Road by fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Finally, on a regional level, Sino-foreign cooperative universities act as hubs of internationalization, contributing to local economic development and elevating the global visibility of the cities in which they are based. Collectively, these purposes highlight the dual role of such institutions in advancing China's domestic educational reform while deepening its engagement with the global higher education landscape.

China's government has encouraged international collaborations between Chinese universities and universities in western countries to set up Sino-foreign cooperative universities and degree programmes in China since 2004. In 2025, 10 to 12 Sino-foreign cooperative universities have been established and delivered degree programmes in the English-Medium instruction (EMI) mode, such as Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), Duke Kunshan University (DKU), University of Nottingham Ningbo China is UNNC, Shanghai New York University (NYU Shanghai), etc. These Sino-foreign cooperative universities are established to provide students with a different learning experience including EMI context, international curriculum design, teaching and assessment standardizations from cooperative foreign universities, and more foreign staff members than Chinese staff members, compared with other traditional universities in China.

The quality of students emerging from Sino-foreign joint universities reflects their distinctive educational experiences, which set them apart from peers in traditional domestic institutions. Firstly, students demonstrate stronger academic competence, particularly in critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and independent learning, owing to the adoption of Western pedagogical approaches such as student-centered learning and inquiry-

based teaching (Huang, 2017; Mok & Han, 2016). Secondly, the use of English as the medium of instruction enhances students' language proficiency, equipping them with advanced academic writing, oral communication, and presentation skills that strengthen their competitiveness in both local and international contexts (Yang, 2018). Thirdly, these students develop significant cross-cultural competence through exposure to international faculty and diverse peer groups, which fosters adaptability, intercultural communication, and openness to global perspectives (Cai, 2013; Wang, 2020). Fourthly, in terms of career readiness, graduates are widely recognized for their employability skills, including teamwork, problem-solving, and digital literacy, attributes that align with the demands of multinational employers and global labor markets (Li & Morgan, 2011; Hou et al., 2014). Finally, participation in such programs contributes to personal development, with students often reporting greater confidence, independence, and leadership potential compared with those in traditional Chinese universities (Maringe et al., 2012). Collectively, these attributes highlight that students from Sino–foreign joint universities represent a cohort of high-quality graduates equipped for success in both domestic and international arenas.

The first benchmark for measuring student quality is the employment rate. According to Wu (2020), graduates of Sino–foreign cooperative universities (SFCUs) demonstrate clear advantages over their peers in both further study and direct employment outcomes. The overall employment rate reached 95.84%, a figure that exceeds the national average for Chinese university graduates. Of these graduates, more than half pursued postgraduate studies abroad at world-class universities, close to one-third continued further education in prestigious domestic institutions, and approximately one-sixth secured employment in transnational corporations or leading local enterprises. These patterns highlight the strong academic competitiveness and professional readiness of SFCU graduates within both international and domestic contexts.

The benchmark for evaluating the quality of students studying abroad is the smoothness and success of their overseas academic pursuits. Zou B. (2022) conducted a comparative study of XJTU graduates (XPS) and traditional Double First-Class university graduates (CPS) in China. Although CPS students scored higher on the College Entrance Examination, XPS reported higher learning satisfaction due to XJTU's educational system, curriculum design, and teaching styles, which closely resemble those in the UK and US. XPS develop skills such as creative thinking, English academic proficiency, critical thinking, and adaptability, enabling them to progress smoothly in postgraduate studies abroad. Compulsory English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in the first two years further prepare XPS for international academic challenges. Overall, XJTU graduates demonstrate strong competitiveness, reflecting the university's philosophy of fostering students' full potential.

To fully understand why students in Sino–foreign cooperative universities (SFCUs) exhibit higher quality, we plan to conduct a comprehensive research study. This study will explore multiple dimensions of student development, including academic performance, learning satisfaction, skill acquisition, and career outcomes. We aim to investigate how factors such as curriculum design, teaching methods, international exposure, and support services contribute to students' competitiveness. By analysing these elements, we hope to identify the key mechanisms that enhance student quality in SFCUs and provide evidence-based insights for improving higher education both domestically and internationally.

## 1.2 Literature Review

### 1.2.1 Relevant research summary

In Zheng's research (2023), factors influencing quality of transnational education are investigated. Firstly, this paper meticulously constructs a framework for evaluating the quality of transnational education (TNE) by adopting established service quality models. It begins by grounding its analysis in the foundational Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL), which outlines five core dimensions—reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness—and then applies them to the unique context of higher education. This paper highlights prior research that has successfully utilized these dimensions to measure student satisfaction and their perceptions of educational quality. Secondly, beyond this theoretical foundation, this paper synthesizes a comprehensive body of existing literature that pinpoints the specific variables impacting TNE quality. These include the nuanced design and effective delivery of the curriculum, the qualifications of the teaching staff, the accessibility of learning resources, and the efficacy of student support services. It also gives significant attention to the pivotal roles of institutional and academic factors, emphasizing the importance of a robust host institution infrastructure and clear communication between the home and partner universities to ensure a seamless and high-quality student experience. Thirdly, this paper focuses on the student-centric perspective, integrating studies that demonstrate how a student's perception of value and their overall satisfaction directly influences their engagement and academic success. This viewpoint argues that quality should be assessed not solely through academic metrics, but also through the lens of a student's holistic experience, sense of belonging, and perceived return on investment. Although this paper have explored TNE quality broadly, there is a scarcity of in-depth case studies that analyse programs from a student's viewpoint.

Ke (2024) adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the 3P model and prospective approach to explore the quality of transnational higher education (TNHE) from the student perspective. Semi-structured interviews with 31 students enrolled in 2+2 articulation programmes at Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU) and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) provided rich insights into how learners navigated both Chinese and UK higher education contexts. The purposive sampling strategy ensured representation across disciplines and genders, while the selection of 2+2 students allowed examination of cross-system transitions and their implications for quality assurance.

The findings reveal a nuanced picture of student experiences. While students consistently praised the physical infrastructure, library systems, and e-learning platforms, concerns emerged around teaching quality, particularly under pressures of enrolment expansion and high faculty turnover. Seamless curriculum integration and flexible teaching in the UK enhanced deep learning experiences, yet inconsistencies across instructors reduced satisfaction. Importantly, disruptions such as staff strikes in UK universities were perceived as detrimental to academic continuity.

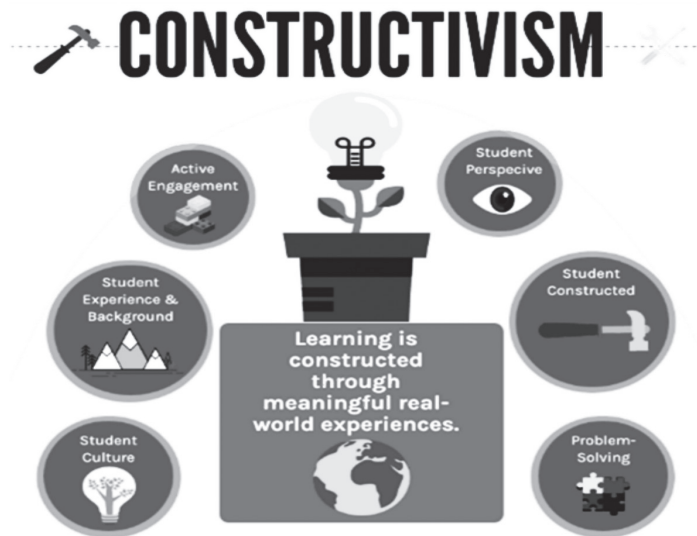
Chen (2023) adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the benefits and challenges of transnational education (TNE) within a Sino-British joint venture university, using semi-structured interviews with students

and staff alongside documentary analysis of institutional policies and reports. This approach effectively captures varied stakeholder perspectives, though its single-site scope limits wider generalizability. The findings indicate that TNE delivers notable advantages: access to international curricula, exposure to Western pedagogical practices that promote autonomy and critical thinking, and enhanced employability supported by intercultural competencies. However, several challenges emerge, including curriculum misalignment between partner universities, administrative complexity, cultural adjustment issues, and English language barriers. Staff also highlighted workload pressures, concerns over institutional identity, and academic freedom. In discussion, Chen situates these findings within global debates on higher education internationalization, emphasizing that TNE contributes not only to academic achievement but also to personal and professional development, preparing students for global citizenship. Yet, structural tensions remain, particularly in reconciling domestic regulatory frameworks with foreign standards, which may foster innovation but also risk fragmentation. The study concludes that the sustainability of TNE depends on student-centered practices and closer institutional collaboration to strengthen curriculum integration, cultural adaptation, and resource allocation.

### **1.2.2. Constructivism Learning Theory**

Constructivism learning theory, originally proposed by Jean Piaget in 1970, emphasizes active learner engagement and the construction of knowledge through personal experience, interaction, and reflection. Widely recognized as an effective foundation for Continuing Professional Development (CPD), constructivism shifts the focus from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning, empowering learners to take ownership of their educational journey (Kay & Kibble, 2016). In traditional didactic models, teachers serve as the primary source of knowledge and authority. In contrast, constructivism pedagogy positions students as co-creators of understanding, encouraging active engagement, critical thinking, and meaning-making processes, as shown in Figure 1.

Within this framework, teachers assume the role of facilitators rather than mere knowledge transmitters. They provide scaffolding, tools, and resources to support students in navigating their own learning paths, fostering inquiry, experimentation, and collaborative learning (Kay & Kibble, 2016). Constructivist approaches not only promote deeper engagement with content but also develop transferable skills essential for academic and professional success, including problem solving, metacognition, adaptability, and effective communication. By centering learning on the individual, students gain motivation, autonomy, and a sense of agency, all of which are critical for lifelong learning and CPD.



**Figure 1.** Constructivism learning model

Prosser and Trigwell (2014) distinguish between two types of student-focused learning approaches: one reinforces students' existing knowledge, while the other promotes a transformative shift in understanding. The latter aligns closely with constructivist principles, as learners actively reconstruct their knowledge frameworks through reflection and interaction. Constructivist learning encourages deep rather than surface engagement, enabling students not only to retain knowledge but also to apply it in meaningful, contextually relevant ways. This approach aligns with Edwards' (2001) observation that empowering learners to pursue personally meaningful knowledge increases engagement, reduces redundancy, and maximizes the effective use of educational resources.

The growing emphasis on student-centered learning reflects broader societal and educational changes, including the increasing diversity of higher education and the influence of consumer-oriented approaches (O'Neill & McMahon, 2015). Students now expect autonomy and input into their learning, necessitating pedagogical models that prioritize engagement, inclusivity, and adaptability—core tenets of constructivist teaching. However, challenges exist in implementing constructivist approaches, particularly in non-Western or developing country contexts where traditional teacher-centered models emphasizing authority and rote learning are culturally ingrained. Without careful adaptation, constructivist methods may encounter resistance or fail to achieve intended learning outcomes (O'Sullivan, 2014; O'Neill & McMahon, 2015).

To address these challenges, educators must adopt culturally responsive strategies, including scaffolding for gradual autonomy, collaborative learning activities, and dialogic teaching that balances guidance with student agency (Bodycott & Walker, 2016). By acknowledging diverse learning styles, prior experiences, and cultural expectations, instructors can create inclusive and effective learning environments that retain the benefits of constructivist principles while respecting contextual realities. Such adaptations ensure that students can actively

engage, construct knowledge, and develop competencies essential for academic and professional success.

In summary, constructivist-learning theory provides a robust framework for promoting student-centered education and lifelong learning. By prioritizing engagement, autonomy, and personalized knowledge construction, it equips learners with the skills and confidence necessary to navigate complex academic and professional environments. When thoughtfully applied with sensitivity to cultural and contextual diversity, constructivist pedagogy can transform classrooms into dynamic spaces where students are empowered to become active participants and co-creators in their learning.

The constructivism framework in this paper is used to explain the theoretical basis for understanding how students perceive and experience the quality of their transnational education. Instead of viewing students as passive recipients of knowledge, this framework posits that students actively construct their own understanding of a program's quality. This construction is not limited to academic content, but also includes their subjective experiences, such as interactions with faculty, a sense of belonging, and the perceived value of their degree. By applying a constructivist lens, the paper aims to move beyond a simple checklist of academic metrics (like curriculum and grades) to a more holistic view that accounts for a student's lived experience. The paper will focus on "student-centric" analysis, "holistic experience," and "innovative teaching methods" directly aligns with this framework, as these elements all contribute to the student's active construction of their educational reality and the ultimate value they place on their degree.

## II. Research Objective

To investigate the factors contributing to the higher quality of students in Sino-foreign cooperative universities (SFCUs) compared to traditional domestic universities, focusing on academic, personal, and professional development. And mainly to answer following questions:

What aspects of SFCU curricula and teaching methods contribute most to student learning outcomes?

How does international exposure affect students' academic skills, critical thinking, and adaptability?

In what ways do support services and campus resources enhance students' professional readiness?

## III. Methodology

This study aims to understand the factors contributing to the high quality of students from SFCU. Data collection will involve distributing surveys to students and graduates to measure academic satisfaction, skills, and career readiness using standardized scales. Simultaneously, semi-structured interviews and focus groups will be conducted with a diverse, purposively selected group of students, alumni, and faculty to explore their perceptions of the curriculum's effectiveness, teaching styles, and international exposure. Furthermore, a document analysis of curriculum structures, syllabi, EAP programs, and university reports will be undertaken to provide context. The data analysis will use a thematic approach for the qualitative data to identify key

patterns and perceptions, while all findings will be triangulated to create a comprehensive model explaining the mechanisms behind the higher student quality. Ultimately, the study seeks to offer insights for enhancing educational strategies and student support in higher education, both locally and globally.

Table 1. Provides demographic information for 10 student respondents who participated in the research study on Sino–UK collaborative higher education programs. It outlines key variables such as gender, academic qualifications, marital status, age, university affiliation, and student satisfaction with international collaboration at their respective institutions.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of Student’s Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent
Female	4	40
Male	6	60
Bachelor’s	3	30
Master	3	30
Ph.D	4	40
Single	4	40
Married	6	60
20-25	5	50
26-30	3	30
Above 30	2	30
XJTU	3	30
Central South University	2	20
China Medical University	3	30
Wuhan Textile University	2	20
Yes	7	70
No	3	30

The sample consists of 60% male and 40% female students. The male students slightly outnumber females, indicating a somewhat gender-balanced group with a modest male majority. This gender distribution may reflect student enrollment patterns in certain disciplines or programs under study.

In context of qualification level, students from all three academic levels including bachelors, masters, and Ph.D. are represented in the sample. The largest group (40%) comprises Ph.D. students, suggesting that the

majority of respondents are involved in advanced research or coursework and can offer mature insights on international collaboration. Equal representation (30% each) is seen at the Bachelor's and Master's levels, allowing for a range of perspectives based on academic experience.

A majority of respondents (60%) are married, while 40% are single. This distribution may suggest that a number of postgraduate or Ph.D. students are married, consistent with their age and education level. Including both married and single students' helps to understand how personal and family contexts may influence experiences of international programs.

Subsequently, age distribution indicates that half the student respondents (50%) fall into the 20–25 age group, typically corresponding with undergraduate or early postgraduate students. 30% are aged 26–30, and 20% are above 30, likely reflecting students at the postgraduate or doctoral level. The age range provides insights from both younger and more experienced learners, enhancing the depth of analysis.

In the perspective of institute level, students are evenly distributed across the four participating Sino–UK collaborative institutions. XJTU and China Medical University each account for 30% of the student sample, while Central South University and Wuhan Textile University each represent 20%. This institutional diversity strengthens the research findings by capturing experiences from multiple geographic and academic contexts within China.

## IV. Findings

A strong majority of students (70%) reported being satisfied with their university's international collaboration, suggesting that the joint programs are largely meeting student expectations. However, 30% expressed dissatisfaction, pointing to existing challenges or areas for improvement, such as communication, curriculum alignment, or support services for internationalization.

The demographic profile of the student respondents reveals a diverse and academically advanced group, with balanced gender representation and a mix of educational backgrounds. The inclusion of students from all four collaborative institutions and multiple age groups provides a holistic view of student experiences within Sino–UK joint programs. The majority of students are satisfied with the collaboration efforts, which supports the relevance and value of international partnerships in higher education. However, the 30% dissatisfaction rate highlights the need for ongoing policy evaluation, feedback mechanisms, and institutional responsiveness to student needs. This demographic data underpins the qualitative findings of the study by ensuring varied and representative perspectives are included in the analysis.

## **V. Interview results analysis**

### **5.1 Theme 1: Enriching Learning Experience through International Exposure**

The majority of student respondents described their experience in the Sino–UK cooperative education program as transformative, highlighting the enriching impact of its international setting. Students valued the diverse faculty, who brought different academic perspectives and teaching styles from globally distinguished universities. As Yang (2023) notes, this exposure broadened students' understanding of subjects beyond a single cultural viewpoint. Many students also emphasized the benefits of learning in a cross-cultural environment, which allowed them to develop intercultural competence, improve English communication skills, and engage with peers from various cultural backgrounds. Collaborative group work and classroom discussions encouraged students to navigate differences in thinking, academic expectations, and, in some cases, time zones, fostering adaptability and personal growth.

Students also appreciated the contrast between traditional Chinese teaching methods and the more interactive, student-centered approaches commonly adopted by UK instructors. The shift from rote memorization to participatory learning was initially unfamiliar but ultimately empowering, as students were encouraged to explore real-world case studies, engage in critical debates, and take initiative in shaping their own learning. The use of English as the primary language of instruction further supported this pedagogical transformation, preparing students for global academic and professional environments. Many reported significant improvements in academic writing, presentations, and teamwork, recognizing the value of English proficiency for future careers or postgraduate studies abroad.

Exposure to global perspectives was another prominent benefit of the program. Students valued engagement with internationally relevant course materials and case studies, which allowed them to analyze and compare practices between China and Western countries. This dual lens strengthened their critical thinking, analytical skills, and ability to address cross-border challenges. Overall, participants overwhelmingly described the program as eye-opening and intellectually enriching, with its integration of cross-cultural experiences, diverse teaching methods, and a globalized curriculum equipping them with the skills, mindset, and confidence necessary for success in international careers and further studies abroad (Yang, 2023).

### **5.2 Theme 2: Challenges in Adapting to Teaching Methods and Curriculum**

Students in the Sino–UK cooperative education program generally valued the international learning environment and global exposure, but they also faced notable adaptation challenges. A primary difficulty was the language barrier. Although English served as the medium of instruction and students had prior exposure to it, many struggled with advanced academic contexts. Listening to lectures and participating in discussions was manageable, yet articulating ideas clearly in spoken or written form proved demanding. Technical vocabulary, discipline-specific terms, and academic jargon required additional time for translation, clarification, and

revision. Some students reported reduced participation in class due to fear of making mistakes. As one noted, “Listening is okay, but academic writing in English takes a lot of effort. I had to take extra time to proofread everything.” These linguistic challenges increased cognitive load and occasionally hindered confidence and engagement in learning.

Adjusting to different academic expectations was another key challenge. The UK curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, active participation, and independent research, contrasting sharply with the lecture-centered, exam-focused model common in China. Students found it difficult to transition from passive learners to active participants, particularly when faced with unfamiliar assessment formats such as reflective essays, research projects, and oral presentations. These tasks required skills like independent inquiry, proper referencing, and academic integrity, which were not emphasized in prior education. One participant reflected, “At first, I found it difficult to keep up because we had to speak in class and participate actively. That’s not something we were used to.” Guidance and time were necessary for students to fully understand and meet these expectations, highlighting the importance of orientation programs and academic support.

Time management and workload added another layer of challenge. The fast-paced curriculum, frequent deadlines, and need for self-directed study placed considerable pressure on students, especially during overlapping assignments or exams. Coordinating group projects with peers from diverse backgrounds required additional effort to align schedules and expectations. As one student commented, “Sometimes it feels like there’s no time to rest. You have to plan every week very carefully, or you fall behind.” These experiences underscore the need for targeted support, including English language assistance, guidance on Western academic practices, and time management workshops. While the program provides valuable international learning opportunities, addressing linguistic, cultural, and organizational challenges is essential to help students adapt successfully and fully benefit from the Sino–UK cooperative education experience.

### **5.3 Theme 3: Perceived Impact on Academic and Professional Development**

One of the most notable outcomes reported by students in the Sino–UK cooperative education program was its transformative impact on academic development. Participants consistently highlighted the enhancement of key academic skills, including critical thinking, analytical reasoning, academic writing, and research methodology. These improvements were largely attributed to the program’s focus on independent learning, inquiry-based assignments, and exposure to international teaching methodologies. As one student explained, “In high school, we mostly just memorized facts. Here, I’ve learned how to question information, build arguments, and write academic papers that make sense.” Many also reported gains in time management and problem-solving abilities, along with increased confidence in participating in discussions, presenting ideas, and engaging with complex academic material. Collectively, these academic gains laid a strong foundation for both current studies and future scholarly pursuits.

Students also emphasized the program’s role in enhancing career readiness and employability. The skills cultivated—such as communication, teamwork, cross-cultural collaboration, and digital literacy—

were viewed as essential for success in a competitive global job market. Some students had already begun planning applications for internships or graduate programs abroad, citing the program as a key enabler of their ambitions. One participant noted, “This program made me more confident in applying to foreign universities. I feel like I can handle the pressure and expectations now.” A few students reported securing internships or job interview opportunities with international companies, attributing these achievements to the competencies developed through the program, particularly the ability to work in English-speaking environments and navigate multicultural workplaces. These experiences reinforced the program’s practical value in preparing students for global professional contexts.

Personal growth and global competence emerged as another major area of development. The cross-cultural dimension of the program helped students build adaptability, resilience, and intercultural communication skills, while fostering independence and self-confidence. One student reflected, “Before this, I was shy. But working with UK professors and classmates has really improved my communication and self-confidence.” Beyond academics, students described the program as a formative life experience that reshaped their understanding of education and their place in a global community. Engagement in joint projects, class discussions, and cross-border learning initiatives provided insights into both Western and Chinese educational cultures, promoting bicultural fluency that students felt distinguished them from their peers. Overall, participants overwhelmingly regarded the program as a catalyst for academic, professional, and personal development, equipping them with the skills and mindset necessary to thrive in an interconnected world.

#### **5.4 Theme 4: Beneficial Aspects of the Program**

Students in the Sino–UK cooperative education program consistently highlighted several aspects of the program that significantly enriched their learning and personal development. One of the most frequently praised features was the presence of international faculty and a globally informed curriculum. Students described instructors trained abroad as engaging, interactive, and intellectually stimulating, employing discussion-driven, inquiry-based, and participatory teaching methods that contrasted with conventional lecture-based delivery. Many reported that this approach enhanced their critical thinking, communication skills, and ability to apply concepts to real-world problems. As one student noted, “The international lecturers make the class more dynamic. Their teaching style encourages dialogue and deep thinking. We’re not just passive listeners—we’re part of the conversation.” Additionally, access to curricula designed or co-delivered by UK partner universities ensured that course content was relevant, up-to-date, and aligned with international academic and industry standards, blending Eastern and Western educational philosophies for a well-rounded learning experience.

Another highly valued aspect of the program was its interdisciplinary approach. Students appreciated how courses integrated knowledge from multiple fields, such as business, technology, communication, and cultural studies, allowing them to examine complex issues from a variety of perspectives. This holistic approach fostered creative problem-solving, collaboration, and teamwork skills by encouraging interaction among students from diverse academic backgrounds. As one participant explained, “We work on case studies that connect theory

to actual business scenarios, and that helps us understand better. It's not just about books—it's about real-life application." By learning to think across disciplines rather than within rigid academic boundaries, students felt better prepared to navigate the interconnected realities of the modern global workforce.

Students also emphasized the importance of access to global networks through the program. Collaborative seminars, joint academic projects, online lectures, and potential exchange opportunities allowed them to connect with peers, professors, and professionals from around the world. These interactions not only broadened their perspectives but also created pathways for future internships, graduate studies, and international careers. One student remarked, "I met students and professors from other universities, and now I have friends and potential collaborators in the UK and beyond. That kind of exposure is really important for my future." In summary, students identified the program's international faculty and curriculum, interdisciplinary learning opportunities, and network-building potential as key factors that distinguished it from traditional Chinese higher education. Together, these elements provided a transformative educational experience that extended beyond the classroom, equipping students with the skills, perspectives, and connections necessary for global citizenship and professional success.

## **5.5 Theme 5: Areas Needing Improvement**

While students expressed overall satisfaction with the Sino–UK cooperative education programs, they identified several areas where improvements could significantly enhance the learning experience. One of the most frequently mentioned concerns was the need for better language and academic support. Although the program helped students improve their English proficiency over time, many found the initial stages challenging, particularly when writing essays, delivering presentations, or completing dissertations in English. Students emphasized the need for structured support systems, such as pre-sessional English courses, academic writing workshops, ongoing tutoring, or dedicated language centers. As one student explained, "Some of us need extra help with English writing, especially when doing dissertations or project reports. It's not just grammar—it's about structuring arguments the way Western universities expect." Discipline-specific terminology and academic jargon posed additional difficulties, and students suggested that optional modules or supplemental instruction at the start of the program could help them build the necessary skills more effectively.

Another critical area for improvement was curriculum localization. While students valued the international content and exposure to global perspectives, some felt that the program could better incorporate the local Chinese context. In several courses, case studies, examples, and reference materials were heavily UK- or Western-focused, making it harder for students to relate the content to their own experiences or future careers in China. One participant noted, "Sometimes, the examples are too UK-focused and hard to relate to. More local examples or case studies would help bridge that gap and make the learning more meaningful." Students recommended a more balanced approach, preserving core international content while integrating region-specific discussions, examples, and case studies that reflect China's social, economic, and business environment. This adjustment would make the curriculum more relevant, practical, and engaging for participants.

Finally, administrative coordination emerged as a significant challenge. Students frequently reported confusion and delays arising from navigating the dual administrative systems of Chinese and UK partner institutions. Issues included inconsistent communication, unclear guidelines, and uncertainty over which institution was responsible for specific decisions, particularly regarding grading or program requirements. As one student explained, “There are times when we don’t know whether a rule is from the UK side or the Chinese side. It can get very confusing, especially when it comes to grades or program requirements.” Students suggested establishing clearer communication protocols, integrating administrative processes between the two universities, and appointing dedicated liaison officers or coordinators for Sino–UK programs. Overall, participants emphasized that strengthening academic language support, localizing curriculum content, and improving administrative efficiency would significantly enhance the student experience and contribute to the long-term success of Sino–UK educational collaborations.

## **VI. Conclusion**

This paper set out to bridge a critical gap in the academic discourse on transnational education (TNE) by providing an in-depth, student-centric analysis of a specific Sino-UK program. The findings confirm that while these cooperative universities successfully democratize access to international degrees, their perceived quality is a multifaceted construct extending beyond academic metrics. The research provides compelling evidence that a student's sense of value and overall satisfaction are profoundly influenced by their holistic experience, including the effectiveness of support services, the richness of the learning environment, and their sense of belonging. This perspective validates a constructivist approach to understanding educational quality, where students actively build their own perceptions through their lived experiences. The study has significant practical implications for stakeholders, underscoring that it's not enough to simply transfer a curriculum. Instead, partner institutions must also collaborate on a robust, integrated administrative framework that ensures seamless support. This research provides a nuanced roadmap for enhancing the quality of cross-border programs.

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