

Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education: Facts, Challenges and Ways out

Hanwen Zhang

Faculty of Education, Office of International Cooperation and Exchange, Northeast Normal University,
Changchun, China

zhanghw100@nenu.edu.cn

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Abstract: In February 2019, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued “China Modernization 2035”, which clearly stated that it was of great necessity to enhance the country’s ability to cultivate top-class innovative talents. Towards this goal, sino-foreign cooperative education has been proved to be a beneficial attempt after years of practice. It not only provides a new model for talent cultivation, but also works as an efficient way to strengthen international cooperation and exchange. However, despite of these achievements, there are also a vast array of issues to be tackled ahead. To rectify those adverse situations, some viable recommendations are put forward. To name but a few, the government should offer favorable policy interventions to strike the balance among different regions. In addition, more attention should be paid to ensure the quality of cooperative education by strictly controlling the entrance, the process as well as the exit. Furthermore, on the basis of safeguarding education sovereignty, cooperation with foreign parties should be deepened and self-development should be further strengthened.

1. Introduction

Sino-foreign cooperative education refers to the educational initiative launched by the Chinese government, which is operated through cooperation between Chinese educational institutions or other social organizations with legal entity and foreign educational organizations, individuals, or relevant international organizations.^[1] This kind of education takes places in China and takes Chinese citizens as main enrollment targets. In practice, cooperative education between Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Macau Special Administrative Region, Taiwan Region and mainland China is also included within this scope. The main purpose of this initiative is to enhance the international competitiveness of Chinese education by introducing advanced foreign educational resources. For that, the Ministry of Education has set clear quantitative indicators for implementation, which is called “four one thirds”. That is, (1)The introduction of foreign courses accounts for over one third of all courses; (2)The introduction of professional core courses accounts for over one third of all core courses; (3)The number of professional core courses taught by teachers from foreign educational organizations accounts for over one third of the total amount; as well as (4)The number of teaching hours taught by teachers from foreign educational organizations accounts for over one third of the total length.

With regard to the value orientation of sino-foreign cooperative education, there is a growing consensus among people that its impact is far-reaching. To students, the introduction of high-quality educational resources has enabled students to “study abroad without going abroad”. Undoubtedly, this has met the demand of selective education within the country to a great extent. As for universities, sino-foreign cooperative education helps to provide a cooperative platform between Chinese and foreign universities. Through teacher cooperation, research productivity is boosted and discipline construction is promoted. Meanwhile, as an open and inclusive form of education, it has achieved a lot in training talents who are familiar with international rules and have international competitiveness as well. As far as the whole country is concerned, sino-foreign cooperative education has a driving role in optimizing the structure of national higher education. To be specific, it is conducive to saving students’ tuition fees which might otherwise be spent abroad. From an

economic point of view, this helps to motivate domestic education consumption and fuel regional economy. Culturally, it serves as a kind of foreign exchange, which exerts a positive influence on expanding cultural exchanges between different countries around the globe as well.

2. Current Situation of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

As an instrumental part of a broader educational reform, the Chinese government has put a predominant focus on the development of sino-foreign cooperative education and there has been a veritable explosion in number since its initial start at 1980s. For the moment, the scale expands tremendously with an enrollment of about 600,000 students, involving more than 700 Chinese institutions and over 800 foreign institutions from 30 countries or regions. In order to respond to the new change, during the past five years, the focus of cooperative education is gradually shifted from scale expansion to quality assurance. This can be manifested in numerous ways. First in 2014, China's Ministry of Education carried out publicity on the suspension of 252 institutes as well as programs below the undergraduate level, which have already stopped schooling activities. Then in 2018, in accordance with relevant law, it terminated 234 sino-foreign cooperative education of or above the undergraduate level, with the aim of further promoting renewal and realizing optimization. The overall number is not small, taking up almost one quarter of the total. Thus, the government's determination to strengthen quality is obvious. Some aspects that require special attention is further put forward as below.

2.1 Educational Level

As the data from China's foreign-related regulatory information website shows, by September 2019, there are as many as 1,909 sino-foreign cooperative educational institutes and programs nationwide. They are wide spread across the whole country, distributing in 28 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions except Tibet, Qinghai and Ningxia. Among them, 882 are under the undergraduate level. 1027 are of or above the undergraduate level, including 822 ones at the undergraduate level, 191 ones at the postgraduate level and 14 ones cover both two levels. In general, as educational level increases, the amount of cooperative education declines. More concretely, those above the undergraduate level takes up only 10.74 percent. In the long run, this will cause a bad impact on the balanced development of sino-foreign cooperative education.

2.2 Regional Distribution

Sino-foreign cooperative education of or above the undergraduate level is further analyzed here, for they function as the main body of higher education. According to the classification of China's economy made by National Bureau of Statistics, 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities can be divided into four parts: eastern part, middle part, western part, and northeastern part. This division has provided a different framework to analyze the development of regional cooperative education. To date, 545 and 209 cooperative institutes or programs are located in the eastern and the middle part, which are economically developed. While in less developed areas, that is, the western and the northeastern part, there are only 105 and 168 such institutes or programs. It is remarkable to note that the eastern part alone comprises 53.07 percent of the whole.

2.3 Foreign Partner

In terms of country of origin for foreign partners, the top ten ones are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Russia, Canada, France, South Korea (parallel No.6), Germany, Ireland and New Zealand (parallel No.9). The first three countries have established respectively 232, 216 and 112 cooperative institutes or programs in China, with a percentage of 22.59, 21.03 and 10.91. Beyond any doubt, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia still have traditional advantages in education export and they together occupy over one half of Chinese domestic market.

2.4 Cooperative Major

As for cooperative disciplines, the phenomenon of assimilation is prominent. Majors like

engineering, management, law and history are quite popular, while the remaining majors account for a relatively low percentage, being only 34 percent.

3. Challenges Faced by Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

3.1 Regional Imbalance Needs Urgent Resolution.

While sino-foreign cooperative education has enriched the form of modern education, it should not become the factor that exacerbates regional imbalance. At present, the majority of graduate-level cooperative institutes and programs, which in general have a higher quality concentrate at only a few economically developed regions. There are ample evidences demonstrating this. To illustrate, 42.44 percent are operated in four municipalities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. Therefore, the redesign of the overall layout is a matter of particular urgency.

3.2 How to Make Qualified Educational Resources Available Merits Critical Examination.

Education quality is closely related with the guarantee of students' rights. This also works as the core of education. However, much needs to be improved in reality. Due to special historical background and realistic limitations, the foundations of some early-established sino-foreign cooperative education are relatively weak. A large proportion of foreign partners do not agree with required demands.^[2] Another case is that, although a few partners do perform well in global university rankings, the cooperative disciplines are not their competitive ones. As for foreign teachers, only a quite small proportion come from the partners' headquarters. As a matter of fact, most of them are temporarily hired by foreign entities without rigorous check of qualification. Obviously, this has gone against the original intention of cooperative education and is detrimental to the sustainable growth.

3.3 Maintaining the Effective Operation of Cooperative Education in the Long Run Poses Another Big Challenge.

Driven by economic interests, some foreign parties have several partners in China, which leads to limited performance during the course of cooperation. Another thing that deserves a considerable amount of attention is, how to internalize on the basis of absorption. This is a daunting task. Cooperative institutes and programs cannot rely too much on certain countries, nor should it solely depend on foreign institutions. Consequently, we need to fully understand the positive role of foreign teachers. A well-known American scholar named Philip Altbach once pointed out that, international universities must fully understand the role of teachers, especially international teachers, and be sufficiently attractive.^[3] This is completely true. A special concern needs to be diverted to exercising the full potential of foreign teachers. Then digest those beneficial teaching concepts as well as practices to further promote the growth of domestic teachers. All these will help to lay a solid foundation for the realization of independent development in the later stage.

3.4 Education Sovereignty Remains Insufficiently Explored.

Education sovereignty is also a matter that warrants serious consideration for the Chinese government. Sino-foreign cooperative education is the spin-off of internationalization of higher education. It inevitably is equipped with elements from both China and other countries. However, university internationalization is not simply Westernization or Europeanization or Americanization. For Chinese universities, internationalization should be conducted under the guidance of international trends and international standards. Besides, more measures should be adopted to explore international integration that fits the characteristics of the Chinese society.^[4] In other words, how to comply with international standards while retaining Chinese characteristics needs to be considered deeply as well.

4. Possible Recommendations for Connotative Development of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

Against the backdrop of an increasingly complex world, sino-foreign cooperative education must correctly rationalize the basic relationship among scale, quality and efficiency. Moderate scale is the foundation. Only when it reaches a certain scale can cooperative education form a scale effect and exert its influence. After it develops to a certain scale, quality becomes the key. On balance, benefit is the final end, which ultimately determines the status and role of sino-foreign cooperative education.^[5]

4.1 Strengthen the Support for Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education At Impoverished Regions.

In the first place, it is crucial to further push forward the development of cooperative education at those underdeveloped regions and optimize the educational resources there. This can be achieved through two directions, for the smooth operation of sino-foreign cooperation is the result of a combination of both internal and external causes. On one hand, an effective approach would be to give preferential policies from the national level to these poor areas. On the other hand, expanding publicity and accelerating the transformation of local people's educational ideas might be a good solution as well. At the same time, more efforts should be devoted to stimulate local institutions to actively participate in opening up and embrace collaboration.

4.2 Enhance the Provision of Quality Educational Resources.

Improving the quality of education is the driving rationale of sino-foreign cooperative education. Therefore, it should be kept in mind to make a strong stand in favor of quality guarantee and conduct quality supervision throughout the whole schooling process. At the initial phase, accurately positioning and grasping a comprehensive understanding of foreign partners is especially noteworthy. Cooperation only makes sense if foreign institutions of reliable quality are introduced. In terms of cooperative institutes and programs which were established during the special historical period with poor foundation, optimization and even reconstruction should be done continuously in a regular manner. While for potential counterparts, more weight should be placed on forging relationship with higher-level counterparts. Over the course, profit sharing must be handled properly to raise such possibility and facilitate reciprocity. For China, it intends to enhance the competitiveness of its higher education. For foreign institutions, the majority of them may treat it as a form of international trade in education service. Hence, we must give full potential to the leverage of profits, making it a link for long-standing partnership. Notwithstanding, before that, feasibility and necessity come first. For only by introducing high-quality education resources on the basis of home country can institutional innovation be fostered and successful education reform be achieved.^[6] At the end of the cooperative chain, with little argumentation, accountability mechanism and withdrawal mechanism gain in priority to reach the survival of the fittest.

4.3 Deepen the Integration of Internal and External Intelligence.

The effectiveness of sino-foreign cooperative education is in large part due to the improvement of local teachers and the cultivation of the country's own talents. This transition couldn't be completed in a radical way. For such cooperation is not only the integration of the resources from two universities, but also the collision of two cultures and the integration of two educational models. When cooperation goes deeper, it goes far beyond the level of resources.^[7] In essence, it is evolutionary in process. Thus, it can make a difference to consciously strengthening the interaction and cooperation between domestic teachers and foreign teachers step by step. Some useful attempts might be addressed in this regard, such as the establishment of incentive measures to jointly develop curriculum design and conduct scientific research.

4.4 Implement Appropriate Supervision and Enable More Space for Further Development.

As indicated previously, there exists much to be thought about educational sovereignty. One is

that, for a long time, the cooperation in running universities between mainland China and Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan regions has been referred to Regulations on Sino-foreign Cooperative Education and Measures for Implementation of Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education. This is difficult to meet the strategic demands of national sovereignty and also the construction of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. The other side is that, the expansion of university scale and influence has raised new requirements for party construction, ideological and political education in those cooperative universities which take root in China.^[8] Therefore, the government should consciously assume the responsibility of proper supervision. On the basis of clearly determining both parties' rights as well as their obligations, the government's policies and actions will have a great implication for the sake of achieving meaningful progress.

5. Conclusion

As an innovation of education model and an impetus for scientific development, sino-foreign cooperative education has achieved great results. At the same time, some issues also have accumulated over the past years. In light of the realities, the educational level needs to be improved; the regional distribution is far from even; the foreign cooperation units are too concentrated; and the diversity of cooperation specialties is insufficient. However, fortunately, there are many ways to reverse these existing or possible disadvantages, like strengthening the support in impoverished regions, enhancing the provision of quality educational resources, deepening the integration between internal as well as external intelligence, and conducting appropriate supervision. With all these efforts, sino-foreign cooperative education will gear smoothly towards continuous improvement.

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