

The Emerging Problems and Challenges Faced by Sino-foreign Cooperation Education: A Case Study from Students' Perspective

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Abstract—The internationalisation of higher education has become a recognized development trend, and international cooperation in running schools has become an important feature of international education exchanges. Universities and colleges are increasingly focusing on becoming global institutions and place global education as the most important institutional priority. With this context in China, this paper explores the emerging problems faced by the Sino-foreign cooperation universities, such as quality insurance, employment related issues, and cultural-related issues. The findings show a clearer map of the situation of the Sino-foreign cooperation education in China and help these organisations better manage and improve their competitiveness in the global education market.

Index Terms—Higher Education Internationalisation, Transnational Higher Education, Sino-foreign Cooperation, Students' perspective

I. INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of higher education has become a recognized development trend, and international cooperation in running schools has become an important feature of international education exchanges. Globalisation refers to cross-border flows of population, culture, ideas, values, knowledge, technology and economy, leading to a more closely linked, more interdependent world. Education is one of the industries affected by globalisation. Some of the most influential forces in globalisation, such as 'market consciousness', the process of massification, technology revolution, and the production system of socially dispersed knowledge all have an impact on education. Globalisation has promoted the entry of foreign higher education institutions and business organisations into one country, which has changed the original single higher education environment, the nature of higher education in the country, and the consistent expectation of higher education. It has been argued that the globalisation of education has undoubtedly changed the environment for education supply, created space and conditions for the development of cross-border education, and has produced a wide range of structural influence on educational systems in the

world. The development of cross-border education is a direct result of education globalisation.

It has been argued by Van der Wende that internationalisation is a way to respond to the opportunities and challenges of globalisation [1], which is rapidly becoming one of the most important and increasingly complex driving forces for the development of education. In the 1990s, there were about 50 international branch campuses in operation while by April 2018, this number grew to 311 [2], [3]. As one of the most rapid developments in internationalization of higher education [4] transnational higher education (TNHE) is defined as higher education in which learners are in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based [5], including franchising, twinning degrees, programme articulations, branch campus, virtual/distance learning, and corporate programmes. It is an important factor in internationalisation, and it is an integral part of the internationalisation of education [6].

According to British Council [2], India and China will drive the growth of outbound graduate students, and China will become the largest source country for international students, with a total of approximately 338,000 outbound graduate students. With the increasing student mobility around the world, the internationalisation of education remains one of the main challenges faced by universities worldwide [7], which is due to globalisation, that is, "an economic trend that is part of the twentieth century reality" [8].

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA'S SINO-FOREIGN COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

It is defined by the Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools: "Sino-foreign cooperative education is the practice of TNHE in China...Foreign institutions cooperate in hosting the activities of educational institutions that use Chinese citizens as their main target for enrolment" [9]. Compared with Singapore, Malaysia, the Middle East, and other countries that allow or even invite foreign universities to set up campuses in their own countries [10], the openness of the China's education market is much smaller. Although on the branch campus list of C-BERT, there are 39 branch campuses (exclude

Hong Kong) in China until 2017, in the Report on the Work of the Government for 2018, these so called 'branch campus' are still named with Sino-foreign cooperation [11].

In China, Sino-foreign cooperation is an emerging form of education with a rapid development after China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 [12]. In China, it is called *Zhongwai Hezuo Banxue*, mainly in higher education, which means "cooperation between foreign education institutions and Chinese education institutions in establishing programs or institutions to deliver education service within the territory of China mainly to Chinese citizens" [13]. According to the data from Ministry of Education (MOE) [14], there are 9 transnational branch campuses in China. In terms of disciplines, business-related subjects such as management, accounting, and finance dominate (42.7%), followed by IT (12%), engineering (11.3%), and medicine (5.6%). The foreign co-operators mainly come from United Kingdom, America and Russia.

Since 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization and announced compliance with the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATs), which represents China's education market open to the world [12]. According to GATs and the relevant laws of China, foreign educational institutions can enter China for educational activities, but the prerequisite is that they must establish cooperative relations with Chinese educational institutions, and both of them must be approved or registered according to laws and have legal personalities. This phenomenon is called 'Chinese-foreign cooperatively-run schools', which also includes relevant cooperation in the field of higher education [15]. With China's economy becoming to the second in the world, and China's demands for high-quality higher educational resources, the China's education market has become to the main target of the British joint schools of higher education [16].

It can be said that the 21st century is the honeymoon period of Sino-foreign cooperation, especially after the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and UK in 2004 and the reform of China's Sino-foreign cooperative education quality supervision system in 2006 [17]. The institutions and projects jointly run by China and UK have developed by leaps and bounds. Among the institutions of Sino-British joint education, the University of Nottingham Ningbo, which was approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2004, and the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, which was approved in 2006, have become successful examples of Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools. Although the Sino-British joint education is in full swing, its criticism and warnings are endless. The most influential report is *British Universities in China: The Reality Beyond the Rhetoric* (2006). The report brings together the views of six researchers with rich Chinese experience. In the article, it pointed out that "China will become a hub for higher education in the world, but it does not mean that cooperation with China is a beautiful thing. What we have to do is not to enter China in a

rushing way, but to think carefully about how to establish a strategic strategy for the integration of higher education between China and the UK, otherwise British higher education will regret it" [18]

III. RESEARCH SETTING

The most extensive research areas on the transnational branch campus involve literature on teacher experience, academic quality and campus management. As the receiver of education, students' experiences and evaluations should be placed in an important position of researches. As a business provider of higher education, universities need to improve students' satisfaction to meet the highly competitive nature of transnational higher education markets. It has been argued that if higher education institutions want to compete through image, the first step is to measure the university image generated by their students. Some researchers believe that if a higher education institution fails to understand the importance of students' needs and satisfaction, it may face the possibility of closure, which could lead to huge financial and reputational losses. However, little exist research examined how students perceive their experiences from different viewpoints, such as functional, social, emotional, or environmental.

This paper is based on a single case study of students' socio-cultural experience at a Sino-foreign cooperative university in China, conducted by a qualitative research approach with an interpretivist worldview. The major research method of this study included 26 semi-structured interviews with graduates who had graduated from the case university by snowball sampling method. The participants were chosen from different majors with the different graduation years to broaden the scope of this research and provide more in-depth data. Each interview was recorded with participant's authorization, lasting between 35 to 60 minutes. All recording data were anonymised and transcribed. The research is ethical approved by College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow.

IV. THE PROBLEMS OF SINO-COOPERATION EDUCATION FROM STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Nowadays, Sino-foreign cooperative universities in mainland China are concentrated in the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta, where the economy is most developed. Educational institutions have begun to run schools with independent legal entity and independent campuses, offering undergraduate courses and above, and issuing diplomas for both their own universities and home universities, such as University of Nottingham Ningbo, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (Suzhou), Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist United International College (Zhuhai), New York University in Shanghai, Kunshan Campus of Duke University, etc. As an emerging economy that has gathered the dual advantages of rapid economic growth and continued strong demand for higher education, China is undoubtedly one of the markets with the greatest

potential for cross-border campus development in the world. The world's top universities and colleges have cooperated with China's organisations in mainland China, which is becoming a unique landscape for the internationalisation of Chinese higher education. We can expect such institutions to bring opportunities for a deeper reform of China's higher education system while the problems it may encounter in its development should always be fully estimated. As the receiver of education, students' experiences and evaluations should be placed in an important position of researches. Students are considered one of the most important stakeholder groups in higher education systems. After discussions with graduates who had been graduated at a Sino-foreign cooperative university, some problems faced by Sino-foreign cooperative education have been emerging.

A. Quality Insurance

According to data collection with participants, the quality issues of Sino-foreign cooperative education could be divided into two parts: teachers' quality and curriculums' quality. The teachers' quality related issues mainly include higher teacher mobility and uneven teacher quality. For some universities that mainly rely on overseas teachers, how to have a team of full-time teaching, research and administrative staff with stable quality and quantity is a major challenge. For example, for teachers from foreign universities who are engaged in natural science work, it is obviously difficult to a long-term research in overseas branches, and whether to engage in high-level scientific research activities is an important sign of whether the quality of schooling can be improved.

The purpose of Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools is to introduce foreign high-quality educational resources, guide various educational institutions, especially higher education institutions, and foreign well-known higher education institutions to carry out various forms of cooperative education, introduce advanced educational concepts and methods, and high-quality courses [19]. Turn these high-quality resources into China's higher education reform and development capabilities, so that China's education cause can truly achieve priority and high-quality development. However, through discussions with students, it has been learned that over the years, some of Sino-foreign universities do not aim at introducing high-quality foreign educational resources. For example, in the dual-campus cooperation model of some universities, the courses taught at Chinese campuses in the previous two years are all based on the original Chinese courses. Except for increasing the intensity of foreign language training, few foreign courses and teachers have been introduced. Foreign organisations simply recognize the credits of students studying in Chinese campuses and allow them to be taken abroad to continue their last two years of study. This cooperation is essentially a cooperation based on mutual recognition of credits on the basis of interests, without substantial introduction of foreign high-quality educational resources. [20]

B. Employment Related Issues

Because the Chinese and foreign partners lack sufficient experience in hosting cross-border campuses, their market positioning needs to be further elaborated, and there are also problems with the goal of talent training. Through interviews with students, it was learned that the vast majority of students who graduated from branch campuses chose to go abroad for further studies, mainly because compared with original universities in mainland China, these universities have shown significant differences in models of talent training, examinations, academic performances, and management. However, compared with people's expectations for such universities, there are still some dilemmas such as the autonomy of admissions has not yet been truly implemented, and it is difficult to meet the needs of diversified admissions; it is difficult for undergraduates trained under novel teaching content and methods to enter original Chinese universities for postgraduate studies; international teachers in such universities are difficult to integrate into the existing Chinese research project application system; due to changes in education and thinking patterns, these students have difficulty adapting to the original Chinese working environment after graduation; due to the large difference of courses schedule between branch campuses and original Chinese universities, when other college students look for work, students at branch campuses do not have the time and energy to compete in the labour market.

C. Culture Related Issues

The internationalisation of higher education is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it will bring advanced educational ideas methods, and on the other hand, it will bring impacts on the traditional culture of a country. Nationalisation strives to make each country's education has its own personality while internationalisation strives to make education beyond the boundaries of politics and culture to develop in a broader prospect. They are interdependent and share common goals. Many localised things are formed through interactions with different nationalities, different cultures, and others, and after mixing, they become the characteristics of the nationality. After a period of development and evolution, localised things may also become internationalised things. The common goal of education internationalisation and localisation is to change the culture of the nation from weak to strong, from backward to advanced, and from strong to stronger. Without this premise, it is meaningless to mention education internationalisation and localisation. Looking at the globalisation of higher education in the world, it is generally based on the nationalisation of education. This is because any foreign educational theory and method cannot solve the actual problems faced by a country and nation without the absorption and integration of nationalisation, which will lose the foundation and motivation of internationalisation.

There are some issues in China's transnational higher education that need to be resolved, such as how to handle the internationalisation and localisation of higher

education, how to solve the cultural differences faced by students in Sino-foreign cooperative universities, etc. As a new education model, transnational higher education needs to solve more practical problems, including problems caused by living habits and cultural differences of students, such as food and accommodation, how to deal with cultural differences that students face in campuses and in the labour market, and how to resolve the relationship between foreign teachers, local residents and communities.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on 26 in-depth interviews as qualitative data with graduates at a Sino-foreign cooperative university, this paper shows the problems and challenges faced by Sino-foreign cooperative education from the perspective of students, including quality insurance, employment issues and culture issues. The quality insurance issues were discussed from two perspective: poor teachers' quality and low curriculums' quality. It is worth to be discussed for further studies that how to improve the educational quality in Sino-foreign cooperative university from the policy level. The employment issues are another highlighted point by students. How to combine the foreign education with Chinese local labour market should be pressed by further studies. Problems due to cultural differences are the last but not the least. Higher education internationalisation is a double-edged sword having both advantages and disadvantages. It needs to be further studied that how to balance these two sides. As an important part of China's higher education internationalisation, the effective resolution of these problems will undoubtedly affect the whole process of China's higher education internationalisation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This article is part of Liying Zhang's doctoral dissertation, and all work is done independently by her.

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Liying Zhang is a third-year postgraduate research student at School of Education, University of Glasgow, the United Kingdom. Before studied in Glasgow, she got her master's degree at Kings College London from 2016 to 2017, the United Kingdom, majored in Public Policy and Management. She spent four years at China University of Mining & Technology and majored in Public Administration for the bachelor's degree from 2011 to 2015, China. Her research focuses on transnational branch campus in China which is an emerging form of education with a rapid development after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Compared with students at ordinary Chinese universities, the students at transnational branch campuses in China are special, who "study abroad without going abroad". However, in addition to motivations for students' participation in transnational branch campuses, little research has been done to cover the experiences of the student, including student satisfaction and the institutional support they receive. The aim of her research is to understand student's experiences at a transnational branch campus in China throughout the university and the impacts of transnational education on students after graduation.