

Innovative Approaches to Cultivating Talents in Sino-Foreign Cooperative Business Programs in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: Cooperation between educational institutions in China and foreign countries is one of the main ways of international exchange and cooperation in education in China.^[1] With the increasing globalization of education, Sino-foreign cooperative programs in universities have been witnessing rapid development, highlighting the growing significance of talent cultivation in this field. Business programs, as an indispensable and prominent component of these cooperative initiatives, demand in-depth exploration and research regarding their talent training models. This paper conducts an innovative study on the development of talent cultivation models for Sino-foreign cooperative business programs from diverse perspectives.

Keywords: Sino-foreign cooperative program, business program, talent cultivation, internationalization, professional ethics, professional competence

1. Introduction

The Office of Ministry of Education, in its 2023 *Notice on Key Tasks for Accelerating the Construction and Reform of a Modern Vocational Education System*, has called for the development of vocational schools with a high level of internationalization. Schools across the country are directed to adhere to the principle of aligning education with industry needs and fostering close collaboration between vocational education and industry. Leveraging their key and distinctive programs, schools are encouraged to pursue a two-pronged strategy of “going global” and “bringing in,” with a specific emphasis on the latter. This involves introducing high-quality international vocational education resources, expanding inbound study-abroad and training programs, and strengthening several Chinese brands for international cooperation in vocational education. Furthermore, the Ministry advocates for the organized development of overseas vocational education programs with Chinese characteristics, including the establishment of overseas vocational colleges and applied technology universities. A key component of this initiative is the cultivation of a cohort of vocational teachers proficient in internationalized instruction and the training of localized technical and skilled personnel to support the overseas development of Chinese enterprises. These efforts aim to comprehensively enhance the internationalization of vocational schools. By 2025, the Ministry plans to support approximately 300 vocational schools, in three phases, that exemplify Chinese characteristics and a high degree of internationalization.^[2] Internationalization of higher education has become an important strategy for the development of higher education in China.^[3] With the internationalization of education, Sino-foreign cooperative business programs have flourished in universities. Cultivating talents within these programs is becoming increasingly crucial.

University business programs encompass a wide range of specialties, including International Business, Accounting, Finance, E-commerce, Marketing, Business Management, Enterprise Management, Business Administration, Entrepreneurship of Small and Medium-sized Businesses, Chain Operations and Management, and more. Sino-foreign cooperative business programs are jointly operated by domestic and foreign institutions. For instance, Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology collaborates with Holmesglen Institute of TAFE (Australia) to offer International Business and Accounting programs; with Nilai University (Malaysia) to offer Business Management and E-commerce programs; and with a UK institution for a Finance program. Students in these programs study domestically for three years, earning an associate degree, and can then choose to pursue a bachelor’s degree at the partner institution abroad, take the domestic associate-to-bachelor’s degree examination, or seek employment. This provides them with multiple graduation pathways.

2. Differences between Sino-Foreign Cooperative Business Programs and Regular Business Programs

There are three primary distinctions between Sino-foreign cooperative business programs and regular business programs.

2.1. Curriculum design

Students in Sino-foreign cooperative programs study a dozen or more foreign professional courses while in China. These courses, from textbooks to examination methods, are identical to those taken by local students at the partner institution and are taught in English. This dual focus on professional skills and English language development is highly beneficial for students.

2.2. Faculty composition

The numerous foreign professional courses in these programs are taught in English by either domestic instructors or foreign instructors dispatched by the partner institution. This diverse faculty structure fosters a multicultural learning environment, broadening students' global perspectives and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, interacting with foreign instructors provides students with a preliminary experience of the learning environment in foreign universities, better equipping them to decide whether to pursue a bachelor's degree abroad and facilitating their integration into the host institution's culture.

2.3. Graduation pathways

After completing the three-year associate degree program in China, students can, like their counterparts in regular programs, take the domestic associate-to-bachelor's degree examination or seek employment. Alternatively, they can apply to pursue a bachelor's degree at the partner institution abroad. This broader range of options is a significant advantage. Before pursuing a bachelor's degree abroad, students need to achieve the required IELTS score set by the target institution and provide their three-year academic transcripts. The credits earned from the dozen or more foreign professional courses taken domestically can be transferred towards their bachelor's degree at the partner institution. Therefore, through diligent effort, students in Sino-foreign cooperative programs have access to numerous promising academic and career pathways.

3. Challenges Faced by Sino-Foreign Cooperative Programs

While these programs offer numerous benefits for students, they also face certain challenges.

3.1. Relatively weak English foundation among students

Due to the higher operational costs, tuition fees for Sino-foreign cooperative programs are relatively high, ranging from 8,000 to over 10,000 RMB per year. This can be a barrier for many families, leading to lower admission scores compared to regular programs at the same institution. A few years ago, admission was even granted to students meeting the minimum threshold simply to fill enrollment quotas. While scores have improved significantly in recent years, they remain considerably lower than those for regular programs. Consequently, students enter these programs with a relatively weaker English foundation, which poses a challenge given the requirement to complete a dozen or more English-taught foreign professional courses. Moreover, students hoping to transfer to the partner institution for their bachelor's degree face the additional hurdle of achieving the required IELTS score, a daunting prospect for those with lower English scores from the national college entrance exam (Gaokao).

3.2. Curriculum difficulty relative to student preparedness

During their domestic studies, students must take multiple English-taught foreign professional courses, some taught by foreign instructors from the partner institution and others by Chinese instructors in English, using textbooks adopted by the partner institution. Passing these courses requires significant effort, particularly given the generally lower admission scores. This creates a discrepancy between student preparedness and curriculum difficulty, necessitating substantial effort from students to succeed.

3.3. Diverse graduation pathways raise demands for professional competence and employability skills

Students who choose not to study abroad after completing their associate degree must seek employment or pursue a bachelor's degree domestically. For those seeking employment, developing professional competence and employability skills is crucial. The requirements for Sino-foreign cooperative business programs are no less stringent than those for regular programs, as students from both compete for the same positions. For example, graduates of International Business (Sino-Australian) programs and regular International Business programs primarily target foreign trade positions, making them potential competitors. Therefore, while students in Sino-foreign cooperative programs grapple with demanding English-taught foreign professional courses, it is equally important to cultivate their comprehensive abilities to meet employment requirements and industry demands.

4. Innovative Approaches to Talent Cultivation: A Case Study of the Sino-Australian International Business Program at Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology

In response to these challenges, exploring and researching innovative approaches to talent cultivation in Sino-foreign cooperative business programs is paramount. Taking the International Business (Sino-Australian) program at Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology as an example, a series of initiatives have been implemented to cultivate talent that meets the demands of both employment and further education.

4.1. Enhancing English proficiency of students

Several measures are implemented to improve students' English proficiency, enabling them to comprehend lectures, participate in projects, and succeed in assessments within the foreign-taught curriculum. IELTS preparation courses are offered to maximize students' potential for achieving the scores required for overseas study. Furthermore, Business English courses are offered to cultivate practical communication skills, both written and oral, essential for interacting with international clients in foreign trade roles.

4.2. Practical training aligned with industry demands

Graduates of the International Business program typically face two key hurdles in the job application process: written exams and English interviews. Larger foreign trade companies often employ both, while smaller companies may only conduct interviews.

Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology has adopted a two-pronged approach to enhance student preparedness. Firstly, the institute offers a comprehensive foreign trade training course using the POCIB platform. Students receive individual accounts and undergo intensive training, repeatedly practicing the entire foreign trade process through simulations, building a solid foundation for their future careers. Crucially, a core component of this training focuses on the preparation of English-language trade documentation, a key area assessed in foreign trade job application tests. This repeated practice significantly improves students' proficiency in documentation. Consequently, the comprehensive training provided through the POCIB platform substantially enhances the foreign trade skills of students in the International Business (Sino-Australian) program. This not only prepares them effectively for the written examinations often encountered in job applications but also lays a strong groundwork for their future success in foreign trade roles.

Secondly, the institute has revamped its English language instruction. Integrating IELTS-style learning and assessment methods into foundational English courses, the program draws upon Australian English testing and teaching methodologies. Leveraging a variety of domestic English language learning apps, the institute employs diverse approaches to enhance students' spoken English proficiency. This comprehensive approach aims to equip students in the International Business (Sino-Australian) program with the necessary skills to excel in the English oral assessments commonly encountered in foreign trade positions.

4.3. Cultivating comprehensive abilities and resilience through competitions

The institute encourages student participation in a variety of competitions at the institute, city, provincial, and national levels to develop their skills and cultivate essential qualities. Students in the

International Business program have consistently achieved high rankings in these competitions. For example, in 2023, they secured second place in the National Finals of the “Jingchuang Education Cup” Entrepreneurship Simulation Track of the National College Elite Challenge. In 2022, they won third place in the Shandong Provincial University Student Science and Technology Innovation Elite Challenge – Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition (Vocational College Group).

Through competitions, students enhance their abilities, cultivate essential qualities, boost their confidence, and gain invaluable experience. The process of preparing for and tackling these challenges significantly strengthens their teamwork skills and broadens their perspectives. This provides a solid foundation for their future careers, enabling them to integrate effectively into teams, calmly confront challenges, develop plans, and execute them effectively. These qualities, highly valued by employers, are nurtured through student competitions. As a result, students transition more smoothly into the workforce upon graduation.

5. Reform Measures for Talent Cultivation in Sino-Foreign Cooperative Business Programs

The reform and innovation of talent cultivation models in Sino-foreign cooperative business programs are paramount. Key areas for consideration include:

5.1. Educational philosophy

Integrating the best of Eastern and Western educational philosophies while discarding outdated practices. This involves combining Western teaching materials with Chinese online education platforms and mobile learning apps to provide students with cutting-edge learning opportunities.

5.2. Curriculum structure

Beyond general education, compulsory professional courses, and electives, the curriculum incorporates at least one-third foreign-taught professional courses, offering a richer and more diverse learning experience compared to regular business programs.

5.3. Teaching methodology

Adopting proven English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching methodologies from countries like Australia, including English proficiency testing, leveled instruction, and diverse learning materials, even incorporating current events and newspaper articles for discussion. This dynamic approach enhances learning outcomes and maximizes efficiency.

5.4. Practical training component

Domestic universities offer excellent training facilities and environments, with highly effective practical training components. Sino-foreign cooperative business programs often share training classrooms, curricula, and practical training exercises with their domestic counterparts. This mutually beneficial arrangement significantly enhances the development of professional skills for all students involved. For example, both students in the International Business (Sino-Australian) program and those in the regular International Business program at Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology participate in the POCIB comprehensive foreign trade training course. Utilizing the POCIB software, each student receives an individual account to repeatedly practice simulated trade processes, providing a solid foundation for future employment in foreign trade roles upon graduation.

5.5. Evaluation system

Regarding evaluation, IELTS-style assessments are employed to gauge students' English language proficiency, using evaluation as a catalyst for both teaching and learning. This targeted approach ensures focused improvement in students' English skills. Furthermore, the program integrates Western process-oriented and project-based assessment methods with domestic evaluation practices, enriching the overall curriculum evaluation system.

5.6. Faculty development

In terms of faculty development, both domestic and international resources are utilized for teacher training. For instance, at Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology, instructors teaching in the International Business (Sino-Australian) program are required to undergo training and obtain either a Training and Assessment (TAA) or a Training and Education (TAE) qualification from Australia. This requirement applies to both domestic and Australian instructors teaching the Australian curriculum components of the program.

5.7. Industry-university collaboration

Regular business programs often hold a significant advantage in industry-university collaboration. Regulations stipulate that institutions seeking to establish Sino-foreign cooperative programs must first have a corresponding domestic program in place. For example, Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology could only launch its International Business (Sino-Australian) program after establishing its own domestic International Business program. Consequently, these domestic programs often predate their Sino-foreign counterparts, allowing them to cultivate extensive industry partnerships over time. These partnerships can encompass a range of activities, including contributing to program development through industry insights, advising on curriculum design, recruiting graduates, and offering internship opportunities. Successful programs that produce high-quality graduates meeting industry demands can even experience a shortage of graduates, with companies actively engaging in campus recruitment and attending career fairs to secure talent. This robust network of industry connections established by the domestic programs provides a substantial benefit to their Sino-foreign counterparts. Furthermore, the resources and connections gained through the Sino-foreign programs can, in turn, enhance the domestic programs, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. Therefore, students in Sino-foreign cooperative business programs have access to a wealth of industry-university collaboration resources.

5.8. Cultural integration

Sino-foreign cooperative business programs offer students exposure to a diverse cultural environment, blending Chinese culture with the culture of the partner institution's country. Foreign instructors bring advanced concepts and distinct cultural perspectives to their teaching. This multicultural exposure cultivates students' critical thinking skills, enabling them to discern and adopt beneficial aspects from different cultures. Simultaneously, students share their own cultural heritage with foreign instructors. With China's rising global prominence, its cultural influence is increasingly appreciated and embraced internationally.

6. Conclusion

The development of high-quality talents within Sino-foreign cooperative business programs is crucial for China's internationalization and contributes significantly to the nation's skilled workforce. Continued research and discussion on these programs are essential to optimize educational resources, methodologies, and environments, ultimately cultivating exceptional graduates.

References

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