



Research on the International Cooperation Mechanism of Higher Education on China and Hungary under the Background of the "Belt and Road Initiative"

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Abstract: As a long-term strategic framework for promoting economic exchange and interaction among participating nations, the Belt and Road Initiative plays a sustained and far-reaching role. Establishing and improving appropriate international cooperation mechanism of higher language education policy is essential under this framework. This paper examines the higher education cooperation mechanism on China and Hungary, focusing on improving the effects of international cooperation, and offers relevant policy recommendations.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, higher education, internationalization

1. Introduction

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road are collectively known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI promotes the concept of the "Five Connectivities": infrastructure connectivity, policy coordination, financial integration, unimpeded trade, and closer people-to-people ties. Achieving these goals is inseparable from effective language communication and language service support.

The Belt and Road Initiative facilitates educational cooperation through policy dialogue, the sharing of best practices, and multi-level collaborative projects. This framework enables participating nations to leverage high-quality educational resources, fortify institutional partnerships, and advance inclusive and coordinated development outcomes.

2. Literature Review

International cooperation mechanism in higher education is a complex process, as different nations hold distinct priorities and expectations regarding this issue. Each country's unique historical background, cultural traditions, resources, and strategic priorities shape its approach to and interactions within international education[1].

To effectively address the demands of global cooperation in society and the labor market, multilingual competence and intercultural understanding are essential. For instance, in the United States, the process focuses on the crucial role of institutional leadership in navigating change and meeting the challenges of globalization[1]. In contrast, German higher education institutions emphasize the growing significance of English language use as a key factor in advancing internationalization[2].

2.1 Concept of Higher Education

The concept of higher education internationalization can be understood from two main perspectives. First, higher education serves an essential academic function. The increasing specialization of research and the substantial investments required in many areas of research and development necessitate collaboration and extensive international cooperation. Second, internationalization also embodies a broader objective aimed at ensuring the long-term sustainability of higher education's global dimension.

2.2 Higher Education Internationalization in China

China's higher education internationalization entered a stage of rapid growth beginning in the 1990s, following the implementation of reform and opening-up policies. During the 1980s and 1990s, all international cooperation in higher education — including foreign student enrollment and partnerships with overseas institutions — required government approval. However, since 2000, China's socio-economic development has encouraged the government to grant universities greater autonomy and to accelerate internationalization efforts[3]. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) provided further impetus for transnational education programs.

A milestone in this process was China's 2015 initiative to build world-class universities, which prioritized international

academic exchange, the recruitment of international students, and the sending of Chinese students abroad for both short- and long-term study programs[4]. The internationalization of higher education has brought substantial benefits to China. Cross-border education has facilitated the exchange of knowledge and cultural integration among nations; on the other hand, it has contributed to social development and accelerated China's globalization process[5].

2.3 Higher Education Internationalization in Hungary

Until the late 1980s, Hungary followed a Soviet-style model of internationalization that largely isolated the countries of the communist bloc behind the Iron Curtain. After Hungary joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, its higher education institutions became increasingly involved in academic cooperation with other European countries, forming new academic networks. The evolution of higher education in Hungary has been closely tied to political and policy transformations.

The collapse of state socialism brought a shift from socialist to capitalist concepts of growth and development[6]. As a post-socialist country, Hungary continues to lag behind Western Europe, making rapid development essential to close the gap. Higher education reforms therefore needed to address these multifaceted challenges, which gradually advanced the process of internationalization.

The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, played a crucial role in reforming and internationalizing Hungarian higher education. As a result, universities viewed participation in internationalization efforts as vital to institutional competitiveness. The number of international students studying in Hungary has steadily increased since 2000.

However, many experts analyzing the reforms from economic and social perspectives have expressed skepticism. These reforms have not fully achieved the intended outcomes of the Bologna Process—such as the establishment of the three-cycle degree structure and the adoption of shared mechanisms like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Consequently, the transformation of Hungarian higher education should be understood within a broader economic, social, and historical framework. The social consequences of internationalization, such as the increasing participation in higher education, have also generated new challenges[7].

2.4 Progress of Higher Education Internationalization in Hungary and China

In recent decades, both Hungary and China have made significant progress in advancing higher education internationalization. Since the 1990s, higher education institutions in Eastern Europe, including Hungary, have sought to strengthen connections with international counterparts through student integrated initiatives. The Hungarian government has also introduced scholarship programs to promote such exchanges.

Recognizing its importance, both Hungary and China have launched initiatives to attract international students as part of their global engagement strategies. By expanding international cooperation programs and mechanisms, both nations aim to enhance their international influence, improve the quality of higher education, and strengthen their competitiveness on the global stage.

Given these developments, an analysis of international cooperation on Hungary and China provides valuable insights into their respective approaches, highlighting both shared trends and distinct national strategies in the internationalization of higher education.

3. International Cooperation Mechanism

The original concept of the internationalization of higher education in the academic area was proposed in 1960, which is only a few decades ago. The proposer was Butts, an American scholar, who believed that the internationalization of higher education should encompass many aspects. With time passing by, Knight held that the internationalization of higher education is a process. This process awareness laid the foundation for later research in this field. Hence, the most authoritative and official definition is that of the International Association of Universities (IAU) of UNESCO. UNESCO believes that the internationalization of higher education is a process. This process involves both inside and outside the school, and it is not only a top-down process but also a bottom-up one.

International cooperation in higher education can facilitate the absorption of excellent cultures worldwide, share high-quality achievements, promote the exchange of higher education, and contribute to human progress and the advancement of human civilization, thus realizing the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind. Internationalization in higher education emphasizes not only focusing on domestic higher education but also promoting it on a global scale. While maintaining the unique characteristics of domestic higher education, it is also necessary to absorb the excellent experiences of other countries.

The internationalization of higher education requires the coordination of strategy, demand and organization. Strategic

coordination guides the development of the internationalization of higher education from a macro perspective and plays a directional role; demand coordination takes into account the inevitable requirements of the internationalization of higher education and ensures its development.

Based on the definition of the mechanism, by integrating the definitions and research issues of scholars, starting from the stakeholders and the functions of universities, the conceptual meaning of the higher education international cooperation mechanism can be concluded as: the government and universities drive the internal elements of higher education international cooperation mechanism (cooperative education, scientific research cooperation, joint training, study and visit abroad, cooperation agreements, organizations and alliances, etc.) to be interconnected and interact with each other, forming an interrelated whole, so that the activities of higher education international cooperation can operate in an orderly manner and realize the operation mode of the functions of higher education international cooperation. The mode of international cooperation mechanism can be seen as Figure 1.

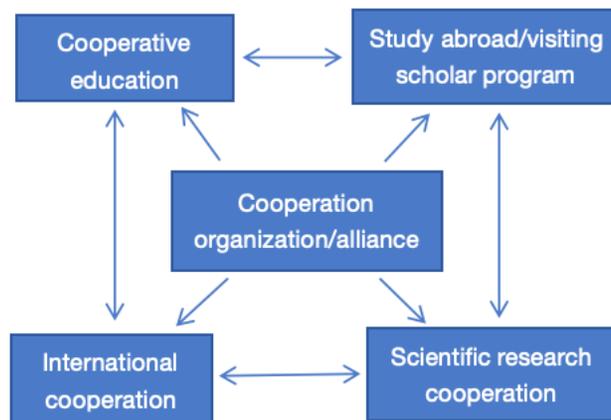


Figure 1. International cooperation mechanism of higher education

4. Comprehensive Cooperation between China and Hungary

Comprehensive and in-depth cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries began in 2012, when both sides decided to carry out cooperation in political, economic, cultural, ecological and other fields. Since then, China and Central and Eastern European countries have embarked on a path of cooperative development. In 2019, Greece joined the "16+1 Cooperation" at the 8th China-Central and Eastern European Countries Leaders' Meeting, marking an important progress in the cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries. Since the international cooperation mechanism was proposed, this is the first new country to join. Although only one country has been added, this change reflects the deepening of cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries.

Table 1. Number of China-CCEE cooperatively-run projects organized by governments

CEE Countries	Cooperative Institute	Cooperative Project	Total Number	CEE Countries	Cooperative Institute	Cooperative Project	Total Number
Hungary	0	1	1	Slovakia	0	0	0
Poland	2	10	12	Bosnia	0	0	0
Romania	0	0	0	Slovenia	0	0	0
Greece	0	0	0	North Macedonia	0	0	0
Croatia	0	0	0	Montenegro	0	0	0
Serbia	0	0	0	Albania	0	0	0
Bulgaria	0	1	1	Latvia	0	0	0
Lithuania	0	0	0	Estonia	0	0	0
Greece	0	1	1	Total	2	13	15

Source: statistics of cooperative education institutions and projects of the Information Platform for Supervision of Cooperative Education Programs of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, up to 2021.

As shown in Table 1, the deepening of the forms of higher education cooperation is manifested at the level of cooperative education. Cooperative education can promote the development of higher education in areas such as scientific research innovation, cultural exchange, personnel exchanges, and talent cultivation. Cooperative education includes both government-organized cooperative education and non-governmental organization-based cooperative education.

A total of 15 institutions and projects for cooperation in education between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have been recognized by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Among them, there are 13 cooperation projects and 2 cooperation institutions. There are 17 countries in the Central and Eastern European region, but the distribution of cooperation in education is highly uneven. The cooperation in education is concentrated in a few countries, while in the other countries of the region, there are none. The majority of the cooperation institutions and projects between the two sides are located in Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, and Hungary. The cooperation majors mostly focus on economy, energy, chemical engineering, communication, language and cultural exchange, etc. Other fields are almost completely blank. The disciplines of the cooperation majors are mostly science, engineering, economics, and occasionally involve management, education, medicine, and agriculture. Cooperative programs are predominantly at the undergraduate level.

Table 2. China-Hugry cooperatively-run schools and projects organized by governments

NO.	Name	Major	Discipline Classification
1	Shangqiu Normal University has collaborated with the Dunaujverdó New City University of Hungary to jointly offer undergraduate education in the field of Communication Engineering Project	Communication Engineering	Engineering
2	North China University of Science and Technology Hungarian Pécs Confucius Institute	Traditional Chinese Medicine	Medicine
3	China Media University and Hungarian University of Rómány	Drama and Film Direction Major	Art
4	Beijing Foreign Studies University and University of Szeged in Hungary	Hungarian	Literature
4	Shanghai International Studies University and University of Szeged in Hungary	Hungarian	Literature
5	Tianjin Normal University and Hungarian Hunzhong Bilingual School	Confucius Institute	Education

Source: statistics of cooperative education institutions and projects of the Information Platform for Supervision of Cooperative Education Programs of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China

Although the influence of non-governmental organization-run education programs is not as significant as that of those certified by the Ministry of Education, it still has an important impact on promoting China–Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) cooperation. It can facilitate the further development of higher education cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe at a deeper level. The specialized fields of non-governmental organization-run education programs are mainly in the areas of economy, transportation, and language and culture. In terms of the educational levels of cooperation programs, undergraduate education and vocational education account for approximately half each. Overall, the educational levels of non-governmental organization-run education programs are slightly lower than those of government-run programs.

5. Results and Discussions

The cooperation between China and Hungary in higher education, situated within the broader China–Central and Eastern European (CEE) framework, demonstrates a multifaceted approach characterized by significant institutional presence but varying depths of engagement. The primary vehicles for this cooperation have been the Confucius Institutes, alongside the establishment of specialized research centers. Data indicates a robust infrastructural foundation, with a notable presence of 34 Confucius Institutes and 44 Confucius Classrooms across the CEE region, which have engaged over 52,000 students and 510,000 cultural activity participants[8]. This highlights a strong focus on soft power and cultural diplomacy, using language as a bridge to foster mutual understanding. Complementing this, the establishment of 8 Chinese national research centers and 14 Asian studies centers in the region, with Hungary hosting 2 and 3 respectively, signals an effort to anchor academic and policy-oriented research within the region. Hungary, alongside Poland, emerges as a key hub for Sino-CEE academic research, suggesting a strategic partnership that extends beyond cultural exchange to include knowledge production.

However, the results reveal a critical paradox in the Sino-CEE cooperation model. Despite this considerable institutional footprint, the discussion must acknowledge that the actual level of integration and cooperation, with the exceptions of Poland

and Romania, is described as "low." This suggests that quantitative presence does not automatically translate into deep, qualitative collaboration. This finding aligns with the broader observation that international education cooperation must withstand the "severe tests of the international situation," implying that geopolitical factors and differing national priorities can limit the potential of such initiatives. The resilience of the cooperation, therefore, lies in measures that "meet the development needs of the countries along the route," suggesting that future success depends on aligning Chinese initiatives with the specific educational and economic goals of partner nations like Hungary.

The recent approval of the establishment of the Chongqing University-Hungarian University of Technology and Economics joint engineering institute is a promising step in this direction, moving beyond language and culture towards high-stakes cooperative education in strategic fields.

Finally, the discussion must address the strategic objective behind such educational cooperation. For the China-Hungary partnership to be sustainable and impactful, it must focus on developing "distinctive higher education cooperation" that offers unique value — be it in engineering, technology, or business — making China a preferred destination for Hungarian students and scholars based on academic excellence and strategic career advantages, rather than financial incentives alone.

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