

Reflections on International Cooperative Education among Universities in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Abstract:

COVID-19 has impacted international cooperative education among universities, and posed multiple challenges such as global public health security, visa restrictions for the movement of people, and bottlenecks in education quality system. In face of the impact of the epidemic and challenges, international cooperative education is still in the demand to explore effective development path and practice mode, including to explore new ways of Sino-foreign cooperative education, establish new model of foreign-related talents cultivation, and open-up a new way of thought on Sino-foreign cooperative education. In the background of economic globalization and the "Belt & Road" initiative, efforts should be made to promote international exchanges and cooperation among universities to go through gradual and steady recovery and development.

Keywords: *Post-COVID-19 Era, Universities, Sino-foreign Cooperative Education.*

The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought great difficulties to global governance. International cooperative education among universities, as an important part of the internationalization of education, is facing an arduous task of coping with COVID-19 and preparing for recovery.

I. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

On January 30, 2020, the global outbreak of COVID-19 was declared as a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" by the WHO and was subsequently declared as a global "Pandemic" on March 11. At present, the multiple rounds of COVID-19 is still spreading in many countries and regions around the world, and the number of people infected has exceeded 200 million. The global combat against COVID-19 is an unavoidable challenge for all countries, and it also presents the issue of our age that the world must face.

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on international cooperative education among universities as follows:

On one hand, the specific exchange activities of teachers and students are extremely restricted. Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, sovereign states and regions have to take control measures, resulting in the extreme restriction of two-way exchange activities like overseas study and visits. In some countries and regions, the prevention and control measures of COVID-19 are not effective, and the lives and health of overseas students and visiting scholars who live locally are under severe threat. In addition, the negative psychological impact on some overseas students and visitors brought by COVID-19 should also be paid attention to.

On the other hand, the future implementation of the international cooperative education program will be affected accordingly. The international cooperation and exchange program among universities has been seriously blocked, leading to practical difficulties in the Sino-foreign cooperative education program and in the enrollment, training, management and employment of international students. The progress of overseas schools has been slow or even stagnated, and the Confucius Institutes and language training centers have struggled under pressure from both maintaining operations and cultural conflicts. Due to the strict implementation of the local epidemic prevention and control requirements, to a certain extent, the investment in the international cooperative education program is not sufficient, and part of works under the program have been marginalized.

II. CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE EDUCATION IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

Currently, the negative impact of COVID-19 on the international cooperative education continues, urging countries to take the public health safety and the related emergency preparation seriously and also prepare for the challenge to the international cooperative education in the future.

2.1 Global Public Health Security

COVID-19 is not only the fastest spreading and the widest infecting public health emergency, posing the biggest difficulty on prevent and control works since the founding of People's Republic of China, but also the greatest crisis the international community has experienced since the end of the Second World War [1]. In the process of globalization, each country can't solve the problems of the spread of virus, the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, the pollution of the environment and so on in isolation, nor can any individual country guarantee its national interests of public health security [2]. Global public health security has become a direct challenge to the development of international cooperation and exchange among universities. In the post-COVID-19 era, how to ensure the health and safety of teachers and students who participate in the international cooperation and exchange activities is the most important issue to deal with. Taking Sino-foreign cooperative education as an example, in the training under a project, most of the selected students from domestic universities need to earn the corresponding credits in China

before they study abroad. Based on the concerns of global public health security, there is still great uncertainty about whether the study arrangements provided by the foreign party can be carried out normally, and whether the students who have completed their studies abroad can return home as scheduled. In the training under Sino-foreign cooperative education program, the health and safety of foreign teachers are also faced with greater risks. It should be said that the concern about and response to global public health safety issues have become one of the primary goals of the progress and programming of international cooperative education.

2.2 Visa Restrictions for the Movement of People

COVID-19 is still aggravating around the world, so countries and regions have adopted quarantine policies, including strengthening border prevention and control measures, partial regional blockade and so on. Some countries have adopted stricter measures to restrict the entry of foreign students who hold student visas, so international students from all over the world start to re-plan their destinations for overseas study [3]. Under this background, as the main body of international cooperative education, the cross-border movement of teachers and students is under strict control. In some countries and regions, the change of epidemic prevention and control policies, which has an obvious impact on the entry and exit of teachers and students, leads to the failure of the international cooperative education program. Even if teachers and students can get in and out of the country successfully, the mandatory quarantine observation is still required. Because of the uncertainty of the international epidemic situation and the possibility of multiple outbreaks, border control measures and visa policies may also remain volatile for a long time, which has a lasting influence on the international cooperation and exchange among universities.

2.3 Bottlenecks in Education Quality System

Statistics show that there are 40.02 million students receiving the higher education in China and there are 2,688 general institutions of higher learning [4]. Undoubtedly, the international cooperation and exchange among universities play an important role in the process of sharing high-quality teaching resources, promoting cultural communication and contributing to the construction of a community of shared future. However, due to the previous philosophy of “Quantity Focused, Quality Ignored” as well as the unbalanced and insufficient development, the level of international cooperative education, especially in terms of quality, is uneven. While the development of Sino-foreign cooperative education is accelerating, there are problems, such as insufficient introduction of high-quality educational resources, poor teaching quality, weak professional competence and lack of a connotative development mechanism, emerging in some institutions and projects. As a result, students are dissatisfied with unattractive projects and the education activity is difficult to continue [5]. As Sino-foreign cooperative education are faced with the difference of educational systems between Chinese and foreign universities, the efforts of coordination and preparation in the operation are highly required. To some extent, the situation may also affect the optimization of the results of the cooperative education.

The outbreak of COVID-19 also indirectly reflects the weakness of international cooperative education, especially the weakness in the development of Sino-foreign cooperative education which already exists. In face of COVID-19, cooperative parties need to make concerted progresses and establish a response mechanism to deal with the unexpected risks that may appear in the various links of cooperative education, and any delay or inaction may bring unpredictable consequences. The alternatives of ongoing Sino-foreign cooperative education projects and other international cooperative education activities need to be in place at all times. In particular, some foreign universities or colleges may face financial crisis due to the negative impact of COVID-19 on the economy, which directly affects the quality and sustainability of cooperative education. The bottleneck of Sino-foreign cooperative education is becoming more and more obvious. Recently, colleges and universities around the world have been reopening, so the risk of another outbreak of the epidemic can't be ignored. A number of universities in Europe and the US have reported numerous COVID-19 infection cases lately. If no effective measures can be taken in time, colleges and universities could be struck hard by the epidemic [6]. The new risk of life, health and safety is likely to arise from the large-scale movement of personnel, student-gathering and management of overseas students. In the context of the epidemic, the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education may be affected, and the long waiting period caused by international travel restrictions often results in graduates missing the employment season and failing to achieve the goal of overseas further education. After the outbreak of COVID-19, the job market at home and abroad experienced significant fluctuation as well. The market prosperity declined drastically, the pressure of employment continued to rise, and social unstable factors increased. All the factors above bring great challenges to the quality of talents nurturing in Sino-foreign cooperative institutions or projects.

III. SUGGESTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE EDUCATION IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

In face of the impact and challenge brought by the epidemic, it is still necessary to explore the effective development path and practice model to promote the gradual recovery and steady development of international cooperative education.

3.1 Explore New Ways of Sino-foreign Cooperative Education

In recently years, Sino-foreign cooperative education has become an important way of cultivating talents in international cooperative education programs. It is estimated that nearly 2,300 Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions and projects at various levels have been approved and put on records by the Ministry of Education, of which nearly 1,200 are institutions and programs awarding bachelor's degree or above [7]. High-level Sino-foreign cooperative education is an important part in China in the process of building a powerful nation in higher education. It is also an important measure to innovate idea of school-running, management system, and improve the quality of higher education in all-around aspects [8].

In the post-COVID-19 era, Chinese colleges and universities should actively integrate into the international cooperation and exchange of higher education, and play a leading and innovative role.

3.1.1 Accumulate advantages and develop characteristic cooperation

Institutions of higher education participating in Sino-foreign cooperative education shall concentrate on developing international education cooperation in their advantageous specialties and bearing the fruit of Sino-foreign cooperative education with the professional characteristics, in accordance with the overall situation of national development, the outline of regional and urban development, and reality of their own institutions. Taking the law major as an example, there is a huge gap of talents in the foreign-related field, especially in the application-oriented field. The cultivation of legal talents requires setting up the concept of international rules and law, keeping close to the orientation of nurturing the foreign-related compound talents, exploring the systematic reform of foreign-related legal courses, strengthening the construction of foreign-related legal faculties, and innovating cultivation channels of foreign-related legal talents [9]. By giving full play to the local advantages and useful experience, and combining with the advanced school-running modes in the world, we can explore the training ways of integrating Chinese practice and the Western model, which will be conducive to the formation of a well-recognized and distinctive training path for Chinese and foreign institutions cultivating talents together. It will also contribute to the long-term sustainable cooperation after surviving multiple challenges including COVID-19.

3.1.2 Renew the idea of cooperation and optimize the way of running a school

The outbreak of COVID-19 has put forward a profound test to the cooperative relationship among parties of Sino-foreign cooperative education, and the governance structure of institutions or projects in Sino-foreign cooperative education should keep up with pace the of times and develop innovatively. According to their own characteristics, Chinese colleges and universities may develop a “One-to-one” or “One-to-many” model of Sino-foreign cooperative education, and they will act as the main body to develop and maintain cooperative education activities with high-level partner institutions around the world. Fundamentally speaking, Sino-foreign cooperative education is an important issue concerning the sovereignty of China’s education. Especially after China joining the WTO, Chinese government made some commitments and concessions in the field of education. To a certain extent, it means to give up parts of the power to intervene and to supervise foreign educational programs [10]. Chinese colleges and universities need to enhance their voice and decision-making power in the cooperative education. In light of the global economic trend, the orientation of talent demand and other developments, we should update the school-running concept, optimize the training program, meet the unmet requirements of employment, promote the process of cooperative education with a more active manner, share high-quality educational resources, and improve the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education.

3.1.3 Strengthen technical support and provide stable guarantee

COVID-19 has almost revolutionized the traditional teaching mode, and both Chinese and foreign universities have adopted online teaching method to overcome the obstacles of the epidemic. In the future,

online teaching is still the best alternative to the traditional teaching mode, and “Hybrid” teaching mode, which combines the online and offline ways, is gradually developing and taking shape. Distance education, especially for overseas students, needs to overcome many difficulties of technology, time difference, personnel and so on, and one of the most crucial factors is technical support. Strengthening the technical support in the teaching and communication of Sino-foreign cooperative education, finding a stable platform to realize the functions of interaction and sharing, and making well-prepared contingency plans for the process of Sino-foreign cooperative education in advance are the necessary support to promoting the sustainable development of international cooperative education and are the basic guarantee to exploring the innovation and revolution of Sino-foreign cooperative education.

3.2 The Establishment of the New Mode about Training Foreign-related Talents

In the post-COVID-19 era, the development of international exchange and cooperation, especially the cooperative education, must focus on the continuous innovation of talent training mode to achieve the basic goal of providing excellent education.

3.2.1 Cultivate national affiliations and inherit excellent culture

In today’s society, a variety of thoughts have emerged, and the foreign-related talents trained by Sino-foreign cooperative education are standing in an area where multiple cultures converge. Only by imparting professional knowledge and paying attention to value guidance about morality and patriotism can we foster high-quality foreign-related talents with strong morals and superb expertise. Through sharing high-quality teaching resources from Chinese and foreign universities, Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions or projects should cultivate talents with national affiliations, who will devote themselves to the construction and development of national undertakings in the future. At the same time, cooperative education should not be limited to institutions or projects themselves, but also provide a broader platform for the cultivation and development of talents, by encouraging students to present themselves, make their voice heard and make their contributions on the international stage with value-neutral positions [11].

3.2.2 Pay attention to the multi-disciplinary backgrounds and adapt to the needs of reality

Globalization is a multi-dimensional concept with economic globalization as its core, including multi-level, multi-domain interrelation, influence and restriction in politics, culture, science and technology, military affairs, security, ideology, life style and values of countries, nations and regions all over the world. In the process of globalization of trade, finance, investment and other activities, we can’t do without the participation of talents in various fields. Therefore, the Sino-foreign cooperative education should pay more attention to the cultivation of talents with compound backgrounds, build a group of talents with multi-disciplinary and diverse background, and meet the objective needs of today’s global economy and social development. Taking law major as an example, as early as 2011, the Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China and the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission issued *Several Opinions on the Implementation of the Educating and Training Program for Outstanding Legal*

Talents (hereinafter “Opinions”) [12]. The “Opinions” points out the requirements for the classified training of outstanding legal talents and claims that the cultivation of foreign-related legal talents should be treated as a breakthrough for the training of applied and compound legal professionals. To meet the needs of the world’s multi-polarization, the deepening development of economic globalization and the opening-up policy, there should be a group of foreign-related legal talents who are internationally minded and are familiar with international rules. They should be able to participate in international legal affairs and safeguard national interests as well. Taking Shanghai as an example, in order to implement the requirements of the “Opinions”, the Shanghai Distinguished Law Education Program was launched in 2012, aiming to train a group of outstanding legal talents who can adapt to and promote the construction of the legal system in the economic society and the process of internationalization. On the basis of classifying and training the outstanding legal talents in Shanghai, the cultivation of outstanding foreign-related talents is the breakthrough of training the outstanding applied and compound legal talents. The above policy documents show that the cultivation of multi-disciplinary professionals is an urgent need and realistic goal to serve the global and national development.

3.2.3 Strengthen applied skills and promote practical teaching

The cultivation of foreign-related talents should lay stress on practical ability. At present, the cultivation of applied and compound talents is still insufficient in our country. Colleges and universities must go beyond the traditional classroom instruction mode, start to let students exercise their legal skills and improve students’ ability to solve practical problems [13]. The cultivation of foreign-related talents in Sino-foreign cooperative education must make a breakthrough in traditional classroom instruction, and improve students’ ability to analyze and solve problems through case teaching, clinic teaching and other methods. For a long time, professionals of Chinese nationality have been extremely under-represented in international organizations, the proportion is even far below those of neighboring developing countries, exerting a very negative impact on our country striving for global voice and participating in the formulation of international rules. In recent years, the internship program of international organizations, as a platform for training professional legal talents with an international vision, the knowledge of international rules and the capacity of foreign affairs handling, has received strong support from the national and local governments. In the process of Sino-foreign cooperative education, it is also possible to integrate the practical experiences in international organizations and institutions as an important part of teaching practice. By setting the international vision, practical application and continuous planning as the guidance of reforming the talent training mode, we will lay the foundation of achieving the requirements of foreign exchanges and international cooperation, and cultivate a group of foreign-related talents with specialized skills, so as to improve the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education.

3.3 Expand the New Thinking of Overseas Cooperative Education

China’s higher education is gradually reaching out to the world with its continuous development and expansion, and the activities of running schools abroad are increasing. The state has also shifted from the

direct management of administrative examination and approval to the indirect management under the guidance of policy. The overseas higher education activities are heading towards the new opportunities and challenges of self-development and self-restraint.

3.3.1 Integrate high-quality projects and coordinate the connecting mechanism

Currently, the forms of overseas schools include the Confucius Institute, Language Training Center, Overseas Branches, Luban Workshop and so on, and each of them has undertaken a relatively independent function. As an important measure of education opening-up, overseas cooperative education should be considered as a whole within the framework of the national strategy, so as to give active and unified guidance to overseas education and strengthen the coordination and connection of the educational forms [14]. In order to accelerate and expand China's education opening-up to the outside world, and promote the healthy and sustainable development of overseas higher education, *The Guidance for Colleges and Universities to Run Schools Abroad (For Trial Implementation)* was first published in September 2019, to provide practical technical guidance for colleges and universities to run schools abroad, and to play an active role in serving the educational cooperation and cultural exchange between China and foreign countries [15].

3.3.2 Analyze the demand for talents and match resources reasonably

The fundamental reason for the failure of some overseas projects is that the mode of talents training didn't adapt to the developing orientation of higher learning institutions and can't match the developing needs of the target countries [16]. In the post-COVID-19 era, Chinese colleges and universities must carefully analyze the demand for talents considering the economic and social development of the places where the schools are to be run. Then with emphasis on the demand for talents, especially the market demand influenced by the economic structure, industrial layout, commercial and cultural exchanges, we are supposed to select the advantageous courses and specialties for overseas school running. It is crucial to investigate the student source market, get to know the local policies, and regulations and cultural environment before operating an overseas institution. On the basis of offering specialties with Chinese traditional characteristics, we should match high-quality teaching resources according to the demand and gradually improve the level of overseas education.

3.3.3 Improve quality construction and promote connotative development

China's colleges and universities started overseas education slightly late and remained in the initial stage. On one hand, overseas education can further improve the reputation and influence of domestic universities, and promote the quality of higher education in China to be recognized by more countries and regions. We may consider consummating the curriculum and the allocation of teachers, aiming at training compound and application-oriented foreign-related talents, making overall deployment and planning, giving full consideration to the sustainable development of running a school, and at the same time taking the effective measures to prevent and control the relevant risk, in order to improve the quality of overseas education. On the other hand, overseas higher learning institutions need to improve quality assurance and

degree certification systems, ensure information disclosure and resource sharing, especially strengthen international communication and cooperation with partners. In order to make substantial progress in running schools abroad, we should coordinate education modes, degree systems and teaching plans, and accelerate the process of negotiations, the signing and implementation of agreements on mutual recognition of degrees and academic qualifications.

IV. PROSPECT OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE EDUCATION IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

The process of internationalization of Chinese higher education won't be stopped by the outbreak of COVID-19. On the contrary, with the deepening of economic globalization and the "Belt & Road" initiative, high-quality international education will continuously promote the modernization of China's education and cultivation of talents with global competitiveness.

4.1 International Cooperative Education in the Background of Economic Globalization

Since the beginning of 21st century, the world has faced the greatest change which was not seen in the hundred years before. The new engines of the world economy are replacing the old ones. The evolution of the international situations and the balance of power has accelerated. The global governance system is being profoundly reshaped. In the grand historical background that socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, China has gradually changed from a passive recipient of international law to a defender and shaper, and has been deeply involved in the international order based on the international law, to be an indispensable party in the main international institutions and negotiations. As an important participant and promoter of global education governance, China will continue to firmly support multilateral education cooperation.

As is pointed out in *The Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening-up of Education in the New Era* (hereinafter "Opinions") issued by the Ministry of Education and other eight departments in June 2020, it is both urgent and opportune to speed up and expand the scales of the opening-up of education in the new era. China, which is the world's largest source of international students and Asia's most popular destination for other international students, plays a pivotal role in the global movement of international students [17]. It should be said that the impact of COVID-19 on international cooperative education is only temporary, and it may change the way of teaching exchanges and the trend of personnel movements in a short term. But the international cooperation of higher education will still enter an all-round, wide-ranging and multi-level stage of development in the long run. In particular, more and more Chinese universities have gradually strengthened their cooperation with world-class universities and academic institutions and actively explored channels for cooperation in high-quality education resources, in order to provide a broad space for speeding up the cultivation of high-level international talents with a global vision.

4.2 International Cooperative Education in the “Belt & Road” Initiative

With the closer connection between China and the world and the continuous promotion of “Belt & Road” initiative, “Going Global” to run schools has increasingly become an important part of the opening-up of China’s education.

Although COVID-19 has had impacts on the education in many countries with different degrees, the “Belt & Road” Initiative and its further implementation have created a precious opportunity for the development of universities. Based on their own development and the regional establishing plan of “Belt & Road”, universities with comparative advantages should follow the trend and move forward orderly, carrying out different forms of cooperative education with the countries along the route. Then we will start to develop the educational cooperation with connectivity, on the groundwork of comprehensive assessment of the cultural exchange basis and political security risks. As is pointed out in the “Promoting the Joint Education Action of ‘Belt & Road’”, cooperative exchanges are the main method for countries along the route to establish a “Belt & Road” educational community together. It is the common aspiration of all parties to foster high-quality talents, promote economic and social development and improve the well-being of people in the countries along the routes through educational cooperation and exchanges [18].

International cooperative education and foreign-related talents training complement each other. Only by further widening channels, deepening cooperation and actively creating favorable conditions through all parties can we accelerate the training of a group of high-level foreign-related talents who are able to participate in international affairs, excel at safeguarding national interests and promote the revolution of global governance rules, more precisely to serve the establishment of “Belt & Road” and the intending active participation by China in global governance and the construction of a community of a shared future.

V. CONCLUSION

Although epidemic outbreaks are still likely to recur, most industries have already begun to engage in the planning and action of the post-COVID-19 era. China will speed up the process of the opening-up in the field of education to deeply participate in global education governance, through optimizing the overall deployment and strengthening the talents training. In the post-COVID-19 era, international cooperative education should set the educational opening-up as main tone, explore the mechanism of cooperative exchanges supported by Sino-foreign cooperative education and overseas schools running, in order to participate in the establishment of highland in educational exchanges field and improve the international influence of China’s education.

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