International Cooperation in Higher Education: Perspectives of Heads of International Cooperation from Cases of European Universities

Zhengwen Qi[1], Meiying Jing[2] & Chang Zhu[1]

[1] Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

[2] National Academy of Education Administration, China

Correspondence: Zhengwen Qi, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium.

Abstract

Fostering international cooperation is essential for addressing global challenges. However, increasing uncertainties and polarisation necessitate a re-evaluation of the rationale and management of international cooperation among higher education institutions (HEIs). Recent research calls for greater attention to international cooperation beyond like-minded countries and emphasises the importance of understanding the perspectives of heads of international cooperation. This study addresses this theoretical gap by examining cooperation with Chinese universities from the perspectives of nine heads of international cooperation at six European universities.

Utilising semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, this study elucidates how these European universities establish and maintain cooperation with their Chinese counterparts. It clarifies the interactions among universities, governmental bodies, and policies, and identifies challenges encountered during cooperation. The findings contribute to the literature by offering practical insights and providing contextualised empirical data on future directions for international cooperation between European and Chinese HEIs. This study underscores the active and autonomous roles that universities should play in fostering international cooperation amid global uncertainties.

Keywords: international cooperation, higher education institution, heads of international cooperation, internationalisation of HEIs

1. Introduction

Recently, the world has been witnessing increasing global uncertainties and complexities, which affected the development of higher education institutions (HEIs), especially their internationalisation process (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). Although international cooperation among HEIs is more needed than ever to solve global problems, it is undergoing intensified scrutiny due to heightened geopolitical pressures (Mäkinen, 2023; STINT, 2024). While previous research considered the process of internationalisation of HEIs as an institutional strategy to embrace change and improvement in response to the impacts of globalisation (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Hénard et al., 2012; Knight, 2003), the current trends of growing uncertainties and polarisations compel us to rethink why and how we establish and manage international cooperation among HEIs.

Many scholars have underlined international cooperation as a developmental key in the global market and external relations, as well as an essential mechanism to enhance international communication and dialogue (Chan, 2004; Altbach & de Wit, 2015). Nonetheless, recent research has observed a tendency of regionalisation of international cooperation among HEIs, and has called for more attention devoted to exchanges beyond regionalisation and beyond like-minded countries (Knight, 2015; STINT, 2024).

European universities have been leading forces in international education (Knight, 2015). Chinese universities have been intensifying their efforts in internationalisation since the implementation of the opening-up policy (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021). In addition, China hosts the largest number of international branch campuses in the world. According to Cai (2019), international cooperation between European and Chinese HEIs has been burgeoning since the 1990s, initially stemming from student and teacher mobility programmes and quickly expanding to research and teaching cooperation in the first decade of the 21st century. In 2013, the EU and China jointly launched the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation (European External Action Service, 2013), reinforcing the role of people-to-people exchanges in EU-China relations and committing to continued dialogue in higher education cooperation and

exchanges. Joint research programmes (Cai & Zheng, 2020) and joint doctoral training initiatives (Zhu et al., 2017) have been flourishing ever since. However, a communication from the European Commission (2021, p.15.) positioned China both as a 'partner for the EU in tackling global challenges' and 'an economic competitor and a systemic rival'. This statement has introduced confusion and doubt into international cooperation between Chinese and European HEIs. In this context, it is theoretically and empirically informative to explore how European universities perceive, manage and maintain international cooperation with their Chinese counterparts.

Studies by Rumbley (2015) and Mäkinen (2023) have reinforced the practical aspects of managing internationalisation at the institutional level, highlighting the perspectives and experiences of practitioners. Therefore, investigating the perception of heads of international cooperation at European universtities, who are important agents responsible for conceptualising and managing international cooperation projects, is both enriching and necessary.

Against this backdrop, this paper intends to explore three research questions:

(1) What are the perceived rationales to foster international cooperation with Chinese universities by the heads of international cooperation of the cases of European universities?

(2) How do the cases of European universities establish, manage and maintain their international cooperation with Chinese universities?

(3) What challenges do the cases of European universities face when cooperating with Chinese universities?

The expected contribution of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to contribute to the ongoing academic discussion on the value of international cooperation in higher education through the perspectives of European practitioners. On the other hand, it intends to provide contextualised qualitative empirical evidence regarding international cooperation management for future studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 International Cooperation in the HEI Context

Internationalisation of HEIs (IHEIs) has been regarded as one of the institutional solutions to deal with the impacts of globalisation, which transcend national boundaries and structures (Altbach & Knight, 2007). As one important aspect of IHEIs, fostering international cooperation was one of the most efficient methods for HEIs to gain visibility, reputation, market share, and to maintain competitive advantages internationally (Beerkens & Derwende, 2007). It also brought benefits to the improvement of curriculum quality, research capacity, and graduate employability, while upgrading human resources with international perspectives and advanced skills (Mäkinen, 2023; STINT, 2024). According to existing literature, international cooperation occured when two or more academic entities from different countries established connections and developed joint collaborative initiatives with shared resources, such as time, effort, material, money and human capital, aiming to achieve common objectives, fulfil institutional needs, and facilitate a deeper understanding among partners (Balbachevsky et al., 2021; Chan, 2004; Kiselova et al., 2020; Pinna, 2009).

Regarding the process and strategies for developing international cooperation in higher education, Chan (2004, p. 42) suggested 'a circular process model, including awareness of needs, selection of partners, implementation, assessment and refinement'.

Through nearly four decades of development, the scale of international cooperation among HEIs has expanded quickly, which has resulted in various forms in practice (Stockley & de Wit, 2011; Zahed, 2016; Kiselova et al., 2020):

(1) Mobility cooperation: international exchange of students, researchers, academic and administrative staff;

(2) Education cooperation: joint curriculum development, joint or double degrees, delivery of transnational education;

(3) Research cooperation: joint research activities, joint bids for international projects, organisation of international conferences, round tables and symposiums;

(4) Development cooperation: development-oriented social and cultural programmes in the partnering country or a third country, benchmarking;

(5) Resource cooperation: development of training programmes, supply of training equipment and materials, exchange of information and resources.

2.2 General Cooperation Frameworks of European HEIs

University is a social construct embedded in robust cognitive, normative and regulative structures and a value-creation pool of various resources (Beerkens & Derwende, 2007). Over the past decade, the international cooperation among HEIs has been increasingly recognised by governments as key to boosting national economies and trade, building national competitiveness and reputation, and providing a skilled labour force with global awareness and multicultural competencies (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Hénard et al., 2012). Additionally, the international dimension of higher education has also become more organised and driven by national governments through policy, funding, programmes, and regulatory frameworks, aiming to unleash the potential of their systems and leverage the latent strengths dispersed across their local economies (Knight, 2004; Hénard et al., 2012; de Wit & Merkx, 2012).

The EU has been identified as an example of employing regional policies with a more comprehensive and strategic approach to boosting international cooperation (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). According to the Council of the European Union (2021), cooperation in education and training was recognised as 'an important instrument for the implementation of EU external relations' and was expected to 'help make the EU an even more attractive destination and partner both in the global race for talents as well as in promoting strategic partnerships with international partners to provide inclusive, quality education for all, in all contexts and levels of education.' In practice, various EU instruments, such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus + and Erasmus Mundus, have been utilised to stimulate international cooperation in higher education, boost international research collaborations and encourage students to acquire international academic experience (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Kiselova et al., 2020).

Research and innovation collaboration constituted a vital part of partnerships in higher education (d'Hooghe et al., 2018). The cooperation interest of European HEIs with Chinese HEIs centred mainly around students and staff mobility, research and teaching cooperation and the export of education (Cai, 2019). d'Hooghe et al. (2018) stressed the need for European HEIs to continue to engage and cooperate with Chinese HEIs. Zayim-Kurtay and Zhu (2019) also highlighted that respective challenges present in European and Chinese higher education systems constitute opportunities and a basis for future collaboration to achieve mutual benefits, enhance competitiveness in the globalised world and broaden perspectives in governance and management. Santiago et al. (2022) further affirmed this perspective and underlined that mutually beneficial knowledge transfer was burgeoning between the two parties. Similarly, Cai and Zheng (2020) proposed viewing international cooperation in HEIs in the context of the higher education strategic framework building, to facilitate knowledge production and embrace institutional changes (Shumilova & Cai, 2016) and build synergies between higher education and other sectors (Cai et al., 2019). Nonetheless, several major challenges in international cooperation in HEIs have been pointed out, such as language and cultural barriers, lack of strategic vision and mutual understanding, lack of trust, and difficulties in coping with incompatible higher education systems (Cai & Zheng, 2020; d'Hooghe et al., 2018).

Ensuring successful institutional cooperation in higher education requires substantial planning, exchange and commitment (Cai & Kohtamäki, 2014). Establishing continuous and frequent contact (d'Hooghe et al., 2018; Zayim-Kurtay & Zhu, 2019) and leveraging the 'human hubs' and 'go-betweeners' role of key persons with extensive knowledge and resources of both sides (Bech, 2016) are suggested to clear up knowledge mismatches and facilitate cooperation among partners. Cai and Zheng (2020) also called for developing a more effective information sharing mechanism to help exchange experiences and insights among stakeholders.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Among the limited research directly addressing higher education cooperation between European and Chinese universities (Santiago et al., 2022; Zayim-Kurtay & Zhu, 2019), few studies have focused on the perspectives of university leaders and middle-level managers in charge of international cooperation. To glean more profound and concrete insights into how European universities perceive, establish and maintain their cooperation with Chinese HEIs, we employed a qualitative research design using interview method to explore the perspectives and specific experiences of selected case universities (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

3.2 Participants

In this study, we adopted a purposive sampling approach as the aim of this paper is not to generalise the findings, but to provide empirical case experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with nine participants from six European universities across five countries (Belgium, Finland, Portugal, Turkey, and the United Kingdom). These cases of universities have been meticulously selected because they represent different parts of the European higher education

area and have rich cooperation experiences with Chinese HEIs. Furthermore, according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) 2024, all these universities ranked within the top five in their own countries, making them particularly relevant for international cooperation with Chinese partners. All interview participants were key leaders at the university level involved in international cooperation, namely Vice-Rectors responsible for international affairs and Heads of International Offices.

3.3 Interviews

Before the interview, short invitation emails were sent individually to the identified interviewees to explain the objectives and the scope of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of their personal information were also highlighted and guaranteed in the email notice. Due to the travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online via the online conference application Zoom. To better identify patterns in meaning without restricting spontaneous reactions from the interviewees, we adopted a semi-structured interview approach suggested by Creswell and Guetterman (2019). Below are some examples of the interview questions:

(1) How do you think of international cooperation with Chinese HEIs at your university?

(2) How are the cooperation and links with Chinese HEIs established?

(3) Which types of Chinese universities and what fields or types of cooperation does your university prefer?

(4) What were your most and least successful cases in your university's cooperation with Chinese universities?

As all interviewees were fluent in English, the interviews were conducted in English. All interviews, lasting from 40 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to facilitate subsequent data analysis. All personal information was anonymised by assigning each university a colour code, along with the initial of the country and the job title of the participant. The table containing the demographic information and applied codes of each interviewee is provided in Appendix 1.

3.4 Data Analysis

As this study intends to clearly reflect the opinions and specific experiences of the interviewees in the sample universities as clear as possible, we used the reflexive thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2012) to ensure qualitative data were collected and analysed in a manner that respected and expressed the subjectivity of participants' accounts of their attitudes. To gain more practical insights from the interviewees, we adopted a constructionist approach and followed the experiential orientation, a predominantly inductive approach, and used both semantic and latent coding methods to code the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 4; Byrne, 2022). The researchers conducted three rounds of coding using MAXQDA2020 to create and refine the codes and jointly concluded the overarching themes based on the relatedness of meaning among the refined codes.

4. Findings

In this section, we present the major research findings related to the research questions.

4.1 Approaches to Establish and Maintain International Cooperation with Chinese HEIs

When interviewees talked about approaches to establish and maintain international cooperation with Chinese HEIs, five dimensions emerged, including motives, cooperation formats, strategic thinking in partner selection, different approaches to establish collaborations and cooperation mechanisms.

4.1.1 Motives

Regarding the aims for international cooperation, several main terms were consistently used by different interviewees, such as 'priority cooperation', 'strategic partner' and 'strategic market'. These terms reflected the attention given to cooperation by the interviewees. However, the visions varied when it came to the cooperation motives. From the interview data, five dimensions of motives have been identified. In decreasing order of mentions, these motives were:

(1) to enhance the bilateral exchange of knowledge and research;

(2) to learn advanced management skills to adapt their institutions to the modernity of the complex contemporary world;

(3) to attract talented students to study at their institution for academic and economic reasons;

(4) to follow policy-led initiatives;

(5) to continue existing historical links and partnerships.

Based on the interview data, knowledge and research collaboration constituted the major components for structuring partnerships, as demonstrated in the following statement:

We would like to focus on research universities that are strong in research and multidisciplinary. We also would like to deepen collaboration in certain areas with some selected universities, for instance, in the field of information technology. (Int 4)

Regarding the motive of learning management skills, several interviewees stressed the advanced skills of HEIs in managing innovation and technologies, particularly considering the sizeable demographic volume and the high speed of technological development.

Now we are in a state where we can learn from partner HEIs what real innovation is. (Int 2)

4.1.2 Cooperation Formats

Corresponding to the motives above, the cooperation formats between the interviewed European universities and their Chinese partners were mainly the following:

(1) students and staff exchange and mobility programmes;

(2) degree programmes such as double degree and joint PhD degree programmes;

(3) international joint research groups;

(4) potential cooperation projects at an enlarged and deeper scale

While the first three categories remained major cooperation formats to meet the 'knowledge and research collaboration' motive, the fourth category targeted more the management experience as well as the university ecosystem to initiate exchange and cooperation in a more strategic and comprehensive way. Regarding the management experience aspect, best practices exchange at the level of decision-makers was highlighted. It benefited mutual understanding and facilitated the exchange of needs and solutions to common problems.

What I think we may cooperate at first is at the level of decision-makers. Because we need to know our decision-making systems. I had an opportunity to discuss with decision-makers and professors from Chinese universities, and we have seen that some of our problems are similar. (Int 9)

Regarding the university ecosystem aspect, cooperation extended from universities to all components of the university ecosystem. Universities acted more as a platform to mobilise partners from different areas to better confront increasingly global problems.

The idea is to have collaborations not anymore from university, but the university and its local, cultural and economic ecosystem with another university with its own ecosystem. The relations that are initially from university to university will extend to university and economic and societal actors at the ecosystem level. (Int 2)

It should be borne in mind that university networks are also part of the university ecosystem, and an example of 'triangular project' referenced by the interviewees illustrated well this idea.

It is a project that would have a point in Europe, a point in Asia and a point in Africa or Latin America. I think we could cooperate with top Brazilian institutions and do some sorts of capacity building projects and so on. (Int 7)

This connection we have with the Portuguese-speaking world is what we really want to make an asset of to initiate projects in Latin America or Africa with Chinese universities. (Int 6)

4.1.3 Strategic Thinking in the Selection of Partners

Most European interviewees used the word 'strategy' when talking about their cooperation with Chinese HEIs. Instead of merely increasing the number of partnerships, they emphasised the quality of the partnerships with universities. To ensure cooperation quality, the most referenced practice was to prioritise top research universities or top disciplines in the selection process of partners. Because they usually had higher rankings and better educational resources. However, one interviewee highlighted their consideration for 'regional universities' when they 'have areas they want to focus on' (Int 8), as it is important not only to focus on top universities, but also regional or local HEIs. In addition, another interviewee stressed their partnerships with educational funding networks, such as the Chinese Scholarship Council, which 'can be utilised towards strengthening collaboration with many universities' (Int 4).

4.1.4 Different Approaches to Establish Collaboration

Based on the interview data, most of the collaborations between the European universities studied and their Chinese partners were established in a bottom-up approach. These kinds of projects were normally initiated at the department or faculty level and mostly came from the personal networks of the researchers or academic leaders. This approach was more proactive and could target different needs of separate departments or disciplines. As mentioned by Int 2, 'the professors and researchers find peers everywhere in the world. And they usually choose the best peer to work with'. The following statement presents a vivid example of this approach:

Most of our partners are top Chinese universities, and the partnerships depend on the field. For example, with P University, we mainly work together in humanities, law and so on. Because we have a former student who has studied in the law school of Red University, who has now a professorship position in P University, and that is how the contact was made. So that's an example where personal contacts turned into international cooperation at the institutional level. (Int 1)

However, there are also several downsides to the bottom-up approach observed by the interviewees. Firstly, it may not necessarily fit the strategic scope of the development of the whole university. Then, the successful operation of this approach is highly dependent on the quality of individual networks, which may lack constant institutional engagement.

The cooperation can be strategic. But sometimes it's just the department of a school that wants collaboration with one particular university. It's not really strategic for the university. (Int 6)

In contrast to the bottom-up approach, the top-down approach did not require pre-existing network links and focused more on initiatives coming directly from the central-level leadership of the universities, either for strategic or diplomatic reasons.

We had quite a strong vice-rector in charge of international affairs. And we conducted several trips and visited some top institutions. And based on these delegation visits, there was a person in charge to establish agreements with these institutions. And we signed quite a number of agreements in this fashion. (Int 4)

The partnerships set up in this way were normally aligned with overall university strategies. However, it might overlook the specific needs at the faculty level in practice.

If you say from the top you have to do certain international projects. It is just one way of setting up international cooperation. (Int 9)

4.1.5 Cooperation Mechanisms

To facilitate cooperation opportunities or consolidate existing cooperation with international partners, three of the universities studied have set up a dedicated platform or network and two of them have even assigned a specific contact person to coordinate specific cooperation activities. The other three case universities have established dedicated workgroups gathering experts with rich collaboration experience with partner universities. The major roles assumed by these mechanisms are the following:

(1) social networking and institutional communication;

(2) promotion of existing cooperation projects;

(3) sharing the latest developments related to education cooperation and exchanges;

(4) sharing knowledge from the existing cooperation projects with partners.

Some interviewees also stressed other constructed platforms such as alumni networks or international forums organised to maintain contact with Chinese HEIs and consolidate the influence and visibility of their institution.

Regarding how universities set up international cooperation, all interviewees stated that their university was 'autonomous' in establishing and managing international cooperation and partnerships because universities are sufficiently autonomous to create their own policies for international cooperation (Int 7). The central authorities of the university played a significant role in structuring international cooperation and supporting individual professors to initiate cooperation projects. Their role was to 'sustain actually structured collaboration over longer times when it gets a certain scale.' (Int 2)

According to the interviewees, the EU regulations and national policies also served as guidelines with indicative functions. They set up standards and put forward general frameworks for universities to proceed with international cooperation.

We follow EU regulations. And normally they are translated into our national system. But mainly it gives some indication of the dos and don'ts. But for the rest, universities in our country are free in establishing partnerships in higher education cooperation. (Int 1)

Interviewees also stressed the role of ministries of education on their international cooperation in higher education. Basically, the role of the authorities was to clear barriers of potential conflicts, understand the initiatives taken by universities and support them within their capabilities.

Finland has a kind of education ambassador in Beijing and her duty is to enhance the cooperation in the field of education and research between Finnish and Chinese HEIs. (Int 5)

In some cases, the ministries have set up working groups involving high-level academic leaders to better exchange information and smooth the implementation of specific policies.

The ministry also has different types of working groups. For instance, there are some internationalisation and national policies. In order to implement them, there is quite a large working group actually led by one of the rectors of the universities. (Int 4)

4.2 Perceived Challenges in the Process of International Cooperation

There were three common challenges perceived by the interviewees in their international cooperation in general, and also specifically with Chinese HEIs, including language and cultural barriers, unequal student numbers, and geopolitical influence.

4.2.1 Language Barrier and Different Cultural Understanding

The biggest challenge referenced by all interviewees was the language barrier and different cultural understanding. Because it could lead to different working styles, different ways to design curricula and even misunderstandings of what had been achieved in negotiation. However, they all expressed their respect for cultural differences and adopted a quite positive view. They called for learning more from each other to build trust and find ways to cooperate despite cultural differences.

Language and cultural barriers were also present in student mobility cooperation programmes. For instance, it influenced the effectiveness of students' understanding of the course content, impacted the availability of high-quality courses in English, and prevented students from integrating into the local community.

We've been having some problems with some students, and they don't speak as much Portuguese or English as they need to understand the classes. (Int 6)

At some institutions, even if the quality of the institution is high and it's a well-ranked institution, there is a limited number of courses in English. (Int 4)

At my university I think Chinese students are really good model students. But they all sometimes gravitate towards their own peers or their own cultures. (Int 3)

4.2.2 Unequal Level of Scale for Student Exchange Programmes

In addition to language barriers, four interviewees also underlined the challenge brought by the unequal student populations for student mobility programmes. It is often difficult to send an equally high number of students to China. Meanwhile, it can be problematic for some incoming projects.

The scale of European universities is very small compared with Chinese universities. For instance, if a Chinese university sends 400 students to our university, that is like one-fourth of the whole first-year students in the whole university for us. So it is a problem for some incoming programmes in terms of logistics, the size of the university, the size of the rooms, the number of students per class. (Int 6)

4.2.3 Geopolitical Influence

Geopolitical influence was also mentioned regarding cooperation challenges, especially its impact on the perception of cooperation. On this matter, interviewees underlined the importance of trust in the university's capability to continue engaging with partners.

I think it's really about having confidence in the relationship between the universities, and in the staff and the universities to move beyond policy and recognising that we're in the business of education and that we were united by that common goal. (Int 3)

In addition, interviewees highlighted the necessity of international cooperation among HEIs to achieve the sustainable development goals. In their opinion, universities should stay objective and keep autonomy, instead of

complying with short-term policies.

There is a tendency in Europe to pull back the international policy to Europe itself. But if you look at the SDGs, they will not be solved alone. It will be solved globally by cooperation between all these countries. (Int 2)

5. Discussions

This study aimed to elucidate how some cases of European universities perceive, establish and maintain their international cooperation, specifically with Chinese HEIs.

5.1 Motives, Formats and Approaches to Establish and Maintain International Cooperation

Previous research identified academic, economic, cultural and political rationales as the major motives driving the internationalisation of HEIs (Knight, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Hénard et al., 2012; Gao, 2015). This study confirms the wide variety of reasons for collaboration, and also highlights the importance of learning and sharing management experiences in innovation and technologies among the sampled universities when collaborating with their Chinese colleagues.

As for the cooperation formats, this study aligns with previous research in finding that the major formats for EU-China international cooperation in higher education remain research projects, degree programmes and student and/or staff mobility programmes (Cai, 2019; d'Hooghe et al., 2018). However, this study observes the willingness of the sample European universities to establish more systematic and resource-integrated international cooperation with Chinese HEIs. This observation echoes Cai and Zheng's (2020) proposal to consider international cooperation in HEIs as a major contributor to strategic framework building among European and Chinese HEIs, instead of being confined to education and research (Cai, 2019). In addition, sample participants stressed the importance of sharing experiences and information among high-level leaders of HEIs from both sides to facilitate mutually beneficial practice learning and build trust. This not only aligns with Cai and Zheng's (2020) call for developing a more effective information sharing mechanism among stakeholders in higher education cooperation, but also illustrates the advantages of exchanging ideas beyond regionalisation and like-minded countries as depicted by STINT (2024). Taken these perspectives into account, as suggested by one of the sample interviewees (Int 2), European and Chinese HEIs should aim for 'cooperation at the ecosystem level', mobilising resources among education, research and the knowledge-based society. In this context, the example of the 'triangular project' could add another dimension to the ecosystem, which is the institutional networking capabilities. This dimension could enhance the synergies between university ecosystems and create conditions for cooperation on a larger scale. In this manner, it may pave the way for building synergies between higher education and other sectors as proposed by Cai et al. (2019) within and beyond EU-China HEIs.

Regarding the approaches to establishing international cooperation between the sampled European HEIs and their Chinese counterparts, this study scrutinises the 'Process and Strategies for International Cooperation in Higher Education' model suggested by Chan (2004, p. 42) with contextualised practices. While interviewed European universities prioritised top universities and top disciplines in partner selection, they also started to look at regional universities and higher education networks. This shows that a deeper understanding of the multifaceted landscape of the higher education system can actually bring more collaboration options. Meanwhile, this study underlines that the bottom-up approach constituted the principal way for the case universities to establish cooperation with their Chinese HEIs. The top-down approach still existed but was less important. Though each approach has its pros and cons, this study observes that a lack of internal communication mechanisms between the faculty and university levels might potentially lead to discrepancies in understanding the strategic significance of cooperation, resulting in a lack of commitment and dedication at both levels. Therefore, university leadership needs to consolidate a clear communication mechanism to ensure the fulfilment of the strategic dimension of international cooperation.

For the maintenance of the established cooperation with university partners, the sampled European universities usually engaged a dedicated coordinator and/or work group composed of individuals with extensive knowledge about the cooperation. They were expected to facilitate the implementation of the cooperation project and provide updated information to their colleagues at the home university. This pracrice echoes the findings from Beerkens and Derwende (2007) that having an effective communication strategy and a clear organisational support process will help build trust, map complex interests and opinions of stakeholders across different systems, and enhance commitment of relevant university members in the process of international cooperation among European and Chinese HEIs.

With regard to the relationship between universities and their external environment influenced by national and regional policies, the interviewees from the case universities considered that they were and needed to be largely

autonomous in establishing international cooperation with international partners, in order to serve the long-term development objectives of the universities. While this study supports the previous literature (Knight, 2004; de Wit & Merkx, 2012; Hénard et al., 2012) that national higher education policies and relevant ministries could help provide an enabling environment for international cooperation of HEIs, it contributes to the literature with the perceived indicative role of European policies, which served as guidelines for international cooperation practices among universities.

5.2 Perceived Challenges in International Cooperation

Concerning the challenges in international cooperation of HEIs, this study is in line with previous literature findings that the lack of mutual understanding and the incompatible practicalities of higher education systems constitute significant challenges for international cooperation in HEIs (Cai, 2011; Cai & Zheng, 2020). A significant contribution of this research is to highlight how language barriers and cultural aspects may cause misunderstanding and influence mutual trust in the cooperation process among the sampled European universities and their Chinese partners, as well as pose challenges to the learning effectiveness of students. Meanwhile, the challenge of the unequal student scales in exchange programmes reveals practical challenges in the execution of international cooperation projects among the sampled European and Chinese HEIs, which highlights the need for more research and solutions to understand and harmonise the differences among higher education governance systems as proposed by Zayim-Kurtay and Zhu (2019). With regard to geopolitical concerns, this study reaffirms the necessity of believing in European universities' capabilities to judge, initiate and maintain cooperation in higher education with their Chinese partners. This aligns with the observation of Mäkinen (2023) that universities are rather proactive actors themselves instead of passive recipients of different policies, especially in relation to the achievement of sustainable development goals.

5.3 Limitations

We recognise that the current study has certain limitations. The first limitation of this study is that international cooperation is a context-based practice. The sample universities in this study comprised 6 universities from 5 countries, which cannot represent the wide range of European universities. Thus, the findings of this study are case-bound, and cannot be generalised. Furthermore, the number of interviewees was limited. Future research involving more participants would be beneficial. In addition, other stakeholders from these universities were not involved. Therefore, the perspectives identified in this study only represented some specific sample participants. The second limitation of this study was that the interviews were conducted at the early stage of the global pandemic, when its influences on international cooperation were not yet evident. However, we found that the interview data and the analyses already provided insightful findings, which can constitute a basis for more in-depth research in this area. In addition, a possible longitudinal study with the participants could be useful to examine the impacts of the global pandemic on specific international cooperation practices.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the academic community by reviewing existing relevant literature and providing up-to-date contextualised empirical data about how some cases of European universities establish and maintain international cooperation, specifically with Chinese HEIs.

This paper investigated the motives, formats and approaches of sampled European universities in establishing and maintaining their international cooperation with their Chinese partners. From the findings, the interviewees stated that cooperation among HEIs is becoming more comprehensive and profound, and should move towards a more systematic and resource-integrated direction. Future collaborations may involve exchanges at the stakeholders' level or at the ecosystem level. To ensure the fulfilment of the strategic dimension of international cooperation, university leadership needs to enhance internal communication mechanisms between the faculty level and the university central level actors. Mutual understanding, information sharing and effective communication remain important for maintaining and improving higher education cooperation among HEIs.

Another contribution of this study is the investigation of the relationship among universities, policies and related authorities in international cooperation among HEIs. This study highlighted the importance of the autonomy of the case universities in selecting partners and establishing partnerships, following the indicative guidelines and fundamental principles set by relevant policies.

Finally, this study revealed the perceived challenges for future international cooperation in HEIs. While language barriers and cultural differences partly explain the lack of mutual understanding, the unequal level of student scale calls our attention to harmonise the practicalities of higher education systems in different contexts. The interviewees

in this study highlighted that trust in universities' capabilities to exercise their actorhood is important for HEIs to continue engaging in academic cooperation with international partners.

This research provides empirical support for better understanding international cooperation among HEIs, particularly between European and Chinese HEIs. Though the contexts of international cooperation may vary, the role and perspectives of university actors who are in charge of internationalisation cannot be underestimated. This is an interesting perspective to be explored in future research.

Abbreviations

HEIs : Higher Education Institutions

IHEIs : Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions

The EU : The European Union

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