

International Education Development Strategies: A Comparative Perspective of US and Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract:

In recent years, the development of international education has gradually become the mainstream research topic in the global higher education field. Taking higher education in China and the United States as the research subject, this paper compares and analyzes international education from multiple perspectives, such as educational concept, system, and internationalization path. The research results show that international education in China displays the characteristics of “government strategy and society logic”: China continuously advances the development of international education from the perspectives of quality and international influence. The government issues policies to coordinate the development of international education, and universities promote international education through institutional construction. Different from China, the United States follows the logic of “market and institution” in the development of international education. The United States develops international education through rules, accreditation, and transparency under the guidance of the government and institutions. Although the governance method and development logic of international education development in China and the United States are significantly different, both face the challenges of policy uncertainty, resource imbalance, and lack of student support. Therefore, this paper suggests that both should learn from each other. China should learn from the experience of the United States in transparency and student support, while the United States should learn from China in top-level design and system coordination. Finally, through the process of learning and institutional innovation, China and the United States can achieve high-quality and sustainable development in international education.

Keywords: International Education; US-China Comparison; Higher Education; Educational Governance; Globalization

1. Introduction

The United States is a traditional leader and early pioneer in international education. It shows a peak model that is market-driven and education industry-led. Its model is strong in attracting and retaining talent. China is a dynamic latecomer and reformer. Its model is strategy-led. International education is part of China's modernization and becoming an education powerhouse. Goals transcend student mobility. China also wants to raise quality, join rule-making, and voice globally. Differences in their global position, in scale and quality, and in how the two countries compete and interact point to different strategies. These differences invite questions.

What are the key goals of the international education strategies of the two countries? Of international education, is it treated as a public good to build soft power and global influence? Or is it treated as a service trade to gain economic returns and high-end talent? In setting rules of fields such as engineering recognition and digital education standards, what roles do the two countries play? Under Chinese modernization, what governance ideas and logics shape China's policies? Under the education as a service trade, what ideas and logics shape US policies? How do these logics shape the actual paths of opening to the world?

At the same time, globalization is pushing education to be more international. The two countries are seeking their role in this field. International education is about more than the spread of knowledge. It is also about cultural exchange, economic cooperation and the rise of national soft power. New technology counts. With artificial intelligence and online platforms, it makes it easier to access and resources richer. It gives students more choices. Expectations for quality have gone up. Goals of international education are changing. Scale is not enough. Quality, better governance, and equity are now central. The US wants economic returns. China wants strategic modernization. How do these choices shape global flows of talent, patterns of knowledge production, and models of academic cooperation? Or do they lead to a dual system and new forms of integration? As globalization and digital tools are reshaping education, what are the core differences in goals, drivers and governance logics in the two countries? How do these differences affect their roles and voice in global education governance?

This research paper turns to the micro level of higher education. It focuses on how universities in both countries manage their daily academic practices under the pull of national strategy and globalization. It shows how these practices maintain internal order. It shows how these practices shape the two distinctive higher education systems.

2. Multidimensional Comparison of US and Chinese Higher Education Practices: From Educational Philosophy to Implementation Pathways

2.1 Differences in Educational Philosophy and Goal Orientation

Facing the differences in higher education between China and the United States, the most important reason is that there are great differences in educational concepts and goal orientations. First of all, in terms of value orientation, Chinese higher education belongs to the philosophical tradition of "societal-centeredness". That is, higher education is regarded as a social function, and the value of education lies in serving society. Under the guidance of this kind of value orientation, the talent training goal of Chinese universities is consistent with the strategic needs of the country, aiming at cultivating qualified builders and reliable successors for the cause of socialism. While American higher education belongs to the philosophical tradition of "individual-centeredness". That is, higher education is regarded as a way to promote the development of individuals and self-actualization. Under the guidance of this kind of value orientation, American universities place special emphasis on respecting individuals' differences, meeting students' personalized needs, and trying to cultivate individuals with critical thinking and an independent personality. From the perspective of goal orientation, China and the United States also have different focuses. Chinese higher education focuses on the systematic mastery of knowledge and the consolidation of basic theories, requiring students to master the whole system of the subject. While in American universities, the cultivation of ability plays a more important role. Especially the cultivation of problem-solving ability, application ability and innovative thinking. This focus difference will directly affect the curriculum setting, teaching method and evaluation system of the two countries, and cultivate different kinds of talents.

2.2 Differences in System Structure and Classification Standards

2.2.1 China: Policy-Driven, Standardized, and Multi-level Internationalization Structure

This section analyzes how China and the United States differ in their specific practices and characteristics across three key dimensions: governance models, quality assurance, and information disclosure. China's international education can be at three levels: policy, mechanism and program.

At the policy level, international education belongs to the national “Chinese modernization”. China is expanding access but promoting high-quality openness, participating in the education governance system, and improving standards of talent training [1]. Cooperation is guided by standards and quality control based on learning outcomes, accreditation, and transparent data [1]. In practice, this is put into action by setting curriculum and credit requirements before cooperation, joint evaluation, and third-party reviews during cooperation and release learning outcomes, retention, graduation rates, and satisfaction data [2,3]. Universities also provide language and writing support, cross-cultural services, and compliance management as routine work [2,3].

The institutional level is about putting these policies into practice. Through measures of degree recognition and assurance, funding, scholarship, information release and evaluations, universities improve accountability and comparability. Meanwhile, China has formed a cooperative model with Chinese characteristics based on its goals of soft power and public diplomacy [2].

At the program level, universities transform internationalization into actions, such as student exchange, joint education, and IaH (Internationalization at Home). IaH means internationalization teaching and learning without going abroad. It means teaching and learning in English or bilingual context, online collaboration with foreign classrooms (such as COIL), cross-cultural assignment, and academic support [4,5]. Institutionalized Internationalization (IaH). Means internationalization teaching and learning without going abroad. It means teaching and learning in English or bilingual context, online collaboration with foreign classrooms (such as COIL), cross-cultural assignment, and academic support [5].

In general, the Chinese higher education classification system shows stronger policy orientation and national strategy characteristics. In China, the policy document of Outline of the National Education Development Plan clearly states, “Based on fundamental institutional orientations of research-oriented, application-oriented and skills-oriented, universities should differentiate between comprehensive and specialized development paths and clarify their respective positions”. This classification system is closely connected with national development strategies and shows stronger directive and regulatory characteristics. In China, university classification is not only a descriptive indicator but also a very important instrument to allocate resources and policies, reflecting the state-guided development model of higher education [1].

2.2.2 United States: Regulation-Centered, Autonomy-Based, and Market-Responsive Internationaliza-

tion Framework

Contrarily, the basic framework of international education in the US relies on federal immigration and education regulations: F-1/SEVP stipulates student status, while OPT (including its 24-month STEM OPT extension and its compliance requirements) regulates student study and internship [6,7]. Nonetheless, the current OPT policy still uses precedents like Bound et al. (2021) without fully incorporating the updated compliance guidelines introduced after the 2022 Washington Alliance v. DHS case about the STEM OPT extension.

Under such an iron-fisted regulation framework, schools arrange programs and admissions according to signals in the market and their own positioning: OPT and employment return relocates students to prefer STEM or business, and then schools increase enrollment for related majors accordingly; while international student tuition and the regulation by discipline for graduate programs, relocate school finances and even its graduate program construction at the university level (design, scale and resource input for program) [7].

Similarly, quality assurance and information disclosure become routine, including third-party accreditation, evaluation of program effectiveness, and public disclosure of information for school graduation/employment [8]. Both for external collaboration and for internal governance, schools have verifiable benchmarks. Contrarily, under cross-border collaborations, through joint ventures with host countries (including joint universities and cooperative programs, especially in the area of Sino-American education cooperation), US schools also relocate their curricula and standards to host countries (both for US and host countries, this is limited to the export of curricula and standards through visa and quality regulations) [9]. In total, international education runs under frameworks of rules, implementation by institutions, information disclosure for outcomes, and protection by services. Tangible benefits for the economy and talents motivate stakeholders to maintain an interest in the system and thus keep it stable and practically effective [10].

This results in differences in the basic models of governance and implementation between China and the US. In terms of governance model, China tends to follow a centralized management model, including “policy-mechanism-project”, focuses on mutual recognition of degrees, process monitoring, internationalization on the ground (including bilingual courses, cross-cultural collaboration courses, etc.), and institutional construction to ensure the steady progress of international education [2,4,5]. While the US tends to follow a model of “rules setting and institutional autonomy”. Schools ensure educational quality

on the basis of third-party certification, evaluation of the project, and information disclosure. They focus on flexibility and transparency but are sensitive to policy changes for OPT regulations [6-8]. A comparative summary of

governance models, quality assurance mechanisms, and information disclosure between China and the United States is presented below, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The information disclosure between China and the United States.

Dimension	China	United States
Governance Model	State-led, policy-driven; government sets national strategy and standards	Market-oriented; institutions act autonomously under federal regulations (F-1, SEVP, OPT)
Quality Assurance	Centralized accreditation and project-level monitoring; limited international standard alignment	Independent accreditation bodies; diverse standards across institutions
Information Disclosure	Limited transparency; data mainly for administrative oversight	High information transparency; data publicly accessible for accountability and ranking

2.3 Path Differences in Internationalization Strategies

In terms of the driving forces of internationalization, the internationalization of higher education in the United States has typical market characteristics, and international education is treated as a kind of service trade. According to the statistics, from 2000 to 2017, the number of international students around the world who went abroad for further education in the United States reached 5.3 million. With the development of cross-border study, the export of international education has become increasingly important. In the national economic accounting, the tuition and living expenses paid by international students in the host countries are all recorded as the export of service trade. Therefore, in reality, international education is in fact an export-oriented industry in the United States, which is connected with visa/OPT policies, student major selection, and school finances [7].

The position of international education in the Chinese policy document can be placed in the following „Chinese plan“ for modernization: making high-quality international cooperation, joining in the construction of global education rules, quality improvement through teaching, research, and innovation, spreading the story of Chinese education through good international communication, and cultivating talents for the world [1]. According to the Head of the Department of Trade in Services of the Ministry of Commerce (2023), China’s exports of travel services, including education services for international students, reached 1.31488 trillion yuan (approximately 183 billion USD), up 56 percent year on year during January to November 2023. However, this number was still only a small part of the 61.9 billion USD worth of education ser-

vices that the United States exported in the same year [11].

3. Challenges and Insights in the Development of International Education in China and the United States

3.1 Internal Tensions and Governance Challenges in China’s International Education Development

As Chinese international education continues to flourish amid the overall layout of „the Chinese path to modernization“, its inherent contradictions and governance problems are also gradually becoming apparent. The biggest challenge faced at present is the „institutional distance“ in alignment and standard recognition, which is specifically reflected in the following aspects: curriculum system, credit conversion, and assessment criteria at the operational level. Here, institutional distance refers to the gap between different education systems in terms of rules, standards, and operational mechanisms, which makes alignment and mutual recognition difficult. First, in terms of the curriculum system, compared with Western courses, which focus on themes and critical thinking cultivation, Chinese courses have a unified syllabus and strong systematicness. There is a natural distance between the two in terms of the systematic impartation of knowledge points during teaching and the organization of teaching content. Second, China and foreign countries have different requirements for the class hours, extracurricular activities and learning outcomes corresponding to „one credit“, which makes it hard to achieve accurate equivalence in credit conversion and often leads to discounts or

extra courses to compensate for the gap in recognition of credit conversion. The more fundamental difference lies in the assessment criteria of academia: there is a strong emphasis on summative assessment and standard answers in the educational tradition of China, while there is a strong emphasis on process assessment in the educational tradition of the West, originality in thesis writing, and critical argumentation skills. This difference in assessment concept leads to the difference and „institutional distance“ in the mutual recognition of scores, grade conversion and the alignment of degree conferment standards between China and foreign countries. This difference makes it hard for many Sino-Foreign cooperative education projects and students going abroad for education in China to form a stable and coherent quality loop of „standard-implementation-assessment-further improvement“. This difference in rules and standards leads to the lack of a unified benchmark in monitoring teaching processes and measuring learning outcomes, which affects the academic reputation and international competitiveness of the projects [2]. The more fundamental issue is that this conflict in rules and standards is not only a conflict in culture and academic philosophy, but also reflects the deep conflict between the Chinese education tradition, which is state-led and focuses on the systematic impartation of knowledge points, and the education tradition of the West, which is student-centered and emphasizes originality in thesis writing and critical argumentation skills. To achieve deep integration, relying on adjustments at the project level is far from enough. It needs systematic alignment and innovation at the national level in the qualification framework and quality standards.

Secondly, in terms of quality governance and transparency, procedural supervision and disclosure mechanisms are lacking. In terms of quality assurance, China currently adopts more “approval-oriented” thinking. There is a tendency to focus on the establishment of projects rather than the quality of the process. When projects are established, there is usually high policy enthusiasm and input. However, during the long-term implementation, there is a lack of continuous and effective process monitoring and outcome evaluation mechanisms. Due to the lack of high-quality data disclosure and effectiveness explanations, those who supervise socially (such as students who want to enroll, partner schools, and the public) are unable to understand the true quality of projects, which reduces the effectiveness of social supervision and thus hinders continuous improvement based on effectiveness [1,4]. Therefore, it is easy to form a situation where projects are launched with high fanfare but run quietly, covering up some quality and ultimately damaging the international reputation of China’s international education. Building a dynamic

supervision and information disclosure system that runs throughout the entire process, is scientific in indicators and transparent in data, is an important link in improving the level of international education governance.

Thirdly, in terms of the fit between promises and experience, there is a large gap between academic support and cross-cultural integration. Many empirical studies have found that international students in China usually fail to experience classroom interaction, academic writing, and cross-cultural communication as expected [12]. If the accompanying language support, academic skills training, and cross-cultural guidance contents are not provided, there will be a large gap between the promises made in the recruitment promotion and the experiences gained by students. In addition to directly affecting students’ learning and satisfaction, this gap will further affect schools’ and even countries’ educational reputation through word-of-mouth. The more fundamental problem is that the function of “soft power” building of international education cannot be realized through promotional discourse [3,13]. Only by realizing the shift from “discourse construction” to “substance provision” can one overcome this problem.

3.2 Policy Instability and Structural Imbalance in the US International Education System

In addition to the United States’ clear position in international education, there are also several longstanding systemic issues associated with it. They mainly reflect in the following two aspects: the volatility of the policy environment, the disparity of resource allocation among disciplines, and the weakness of the system of student support. The first challenge is the instability and volatility of the immigration and visa policy. International students can only stay and study in the United States by holding an F-1 visa, being regulated by the SEVP management system, and applying for OPT (Optional Practical Training) or a 24-month STEM OPT extension. All of these are affected by the domestic political and economic cycles. Any changes in domestic political and economic cycles will affect the choice of schools and subjects for international students, their opportunities for internships and work after graduation, as well as their career plans in the future. They will also bring about additional costs for compliance and uncertainties for schools and international students [7]. The above-mentioned policy environment with much uncertainty affects students’ long-term study and career plans, and compels universities to constantly adjust their recruitment strategies and student service systems. Therefore, the consistency of programs and management will be affected. The second challenge is the structural imbalance caused by market-driven signals. Policies such as OPT,

particularly the preferential treatment of STEM fields, combine with labor market demand to create a self-reinforcing cycle. Tuition revenue from international students encourages universities to expand programs in data science, engineering, and business. This, in turn, deepens the gap between disciplines. While this market-oriented approach may respond to economic needs, it also limits the development of fields like the humanities, social sciences, and basic sciences. Over time, this imbalance harms the diversity and health of the academic ecosystem [7]. It narrows international students' options and may weaken the overall creativity and leadership of US higher education in the long run.

Finally, there are also challenges in students' experiences and supports. Research indicates that when coursework is heavy, language is a barrier, and there are cultural differences, international students' overall experience can be negatively impacted. Undergraduates in particular experience more stress [14]. When universities offer weak support in academic writing, language adjustment, career counseling, and counseling, the quality of support doesn't live up to the quantity, and the huge costs of recruitment are balanced by high dropout rates and poor feedback. Qualitative research also reveals that bias and discrimination on campus can harm students' belongingness and motivation to participate [15]. Thus, support for international students cannot be reactive but must also include prevention. Universities must create systems that include stronger academic and language support, anti-bias training if needed, and easy access to reporting. In sum, when external policies are unstable, when resources are concentrated in a few popular fields, and when support to students remains weak, those pressures multiply to impact recruitment, retention, and post-graduation outcomes. Together, they present serious challenges to the sustainability of international education in the United States.

3.3 Common Challenges and Future Directions from a Comparative Perspective

By comparing the international education problems existing in China and the United States, the common problems beyond the two countries can be summarized from the analysis, and based on this, the possible experiences for the two countries in the future development of international education are offered. At the macro level, both countries face the problem of policy environment uncertainty and imbalanced resource allocation. The problems that the United States faces are the imbalance of discipline ecology, tendency towards the market, while the problem China is facing is how to achieve a balance between scale expansion and quality supervision, and further improve

process governance and data openness [7,12]. At the micro level, international students in two countries confront similar problems of academic adaptation and cross-cultural environment, which shows that establishing a powerful and positive student assistance service system is the basis to enhance the competitiveness and attractiveness of international talents. In the future, there is still a lot of complementary space in the development path of international education between China and the United States. Firstly, the United States can refer to the experience of top-level design and coordinated development in China, reduce the structural fluctuations caused by pure market signals, and make the expectations of policies more stable. Secondly, China can learn from the United States' long-term practice in transparency mechanisms, external certification systems, and fine student service, to make up for the deficiencies in process governance and student experience. As the focus of global education competition is no longer on "scale", but on "quality" and "influence", China and the United States, as two powerful education sending and receiving countries, will continue to dominate the battlefield and model of international education with their respective policy adjustments and practices. The key to future development is that these two countries can not only improve the development of international education in the process of solving their own structural problems, but also these two countries will continue to promote the construction of an open, fair, and efficient global higher education system through healthy competition and cooperation by strengthening the development of student experience [9,10].

4. Conclusion

The current study uses an in-depth, comprehensive, and multi-dimensional comparison to explore the differences and common problems in the development of international education between China and the United States. The multifaceted comparison between these two countries reveals not merely divergent models of international education, but two fundamentally distinct philosophical and operational paradigms that are actively shaping the future of global higher education. The research results indicated that the significant differences and common problems in the development of international education between the United States and China originate from the different educational goals and strategic orientations. Specifically, the United States, as a traditional leader, operates a market-driven, education industry-led model whose strength lies in its powerful, self-reinforcing macro-ecosystem for attracting and retaining global talent; whereas China, as a dynamic latecomer and strategic reformer, has crafted a state-led, policy-driven model explicitly linked to the

grand objectives of “Chinese modernization” and the quest to become an education powerhouse.

When examining their respective faces of difficulty, the study finds that former where China, the issues are quality governance transparency, domestic and international standards alignment, and the student experience and institution commitment congruity; while for the United States, the issues are policy environment instabilities, cross-discipline unbalanced resource allocations, and international students support effectiveness. Despite following different trajectories, China and the United States confront similar issues with globalization, that is, policy stability, better resource allocations, and stronger cross-cultural academic support.

In accordance with the comparative study results, this paper believes that both models have a strong complementary function and space for learning from each other. China should learn from the experience of transparency, third-party accreditation, and personalized student services from the United States to improve its governance and quality assurance. The United States should correct the market system mistakes that have been brought about with good intentions, plans for top-level coordination, and system integration. As globalization enters a new stage of transformation, the development of international education has changed from scale expansion to quality and influence enhancement. As the two important forces in global higher education, China and the United States can, through positive interaction and shared learning, not only promote the sustainable and healthy development of international education but also promote the construction of an open, inclusive, and high-quality global education system.

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