

# SINO-POLAND INTERCOLLEGIATE COOPERATION IN TERTIARY EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE “NICOLAUS COPERNICUS UNIVERSITY 3 + 1 + 2 INTERCOLLEGIATE COOPERATION” PROGRAM

*Xiaochen Bu<sup>a</sup>, Yi Zhang<sup>b</sup>*

<sup>a,b</sup>Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Toruń, Poland

<sup>a</sup>e-mail: [xiaochenbu027@gmail.com](mailto:xiaochenbu027@gmail.com)

<sup>b</sup>e-mail: [yizhang@doktorant.umk.pl](mailto:yizhang@doktorant.umk.pl)

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper aims to identify the strengths and challenges of Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation programs in tertiary education and provide recommendations for furthering these cross-cultural cooperation projects.

**Methodology:** This paper utilizes qualitative analyses. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with individual Chinese students participating in the “Nicolaus Copernicus University 3 + 1 + 2 intercollegiate cooperation” program. This data was then coded and analyzed using a sentiment analysis.

**Findings:** This study shows that Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation is gradually developing, with distinct strengths and challenges. On one hand, the enrollment of Chinese students in this program is increasing, Sino-Poland university cooperation has strengthened, and distinctive cooperation models have been developed. On the other hand, challenges faced by this program include issues with the current profit-oriented model, declining admissions standards, cultural differences in the environments of Chinese and Polish tertiary education institutions, and competition with other European universities.

**Implications:** Based on the results of this study, the authors provide the following practical recommendations for improving Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation. As Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation is still in its infancy, Chinese and Polish universities should enhance their cooperation models to better navigate the cross-cultural context, improve their communication and publicize their projects more. Furthermore, the cooperation projects should not be profit-driven and admissions standards should remain highly competitive to maintain the program’s prestigious reputation.

**Originality/Value:** This study contributes to the developing body of theory on cross-cultural cooperation projects in Sino-Poland tertiary education. It offers insights into the challenges that arise from current Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation programs and offers suggestions for develop-

ing better cooperation models in the future so that Sino-Poland tertiary education cooperation can develop its own unique symbiotic culture and management model.

**Keywords:** Sino-Poland, cross-culture cooperation, tertiary education, intercollegiate cooperation

**Paper type:** Case study

## 1. Introduction

Tertiary education has become a crucial part of national education systems worldwide, and academic exchange between international institutions is a growing trend. The internationalization of tertiary education in China and Poland has made rapid progress thanks to China's One Belt One Road initiative. As one of the One Belt One Road member countries, Poland has developed its cooperation with China in various industries including academia.

Over the past five years, Chinese universities have placed a greater focus on expanding cooperation with Polish institutions. Using the services of Chinese education intermediaries for placement, an ever-increasing number of Chinese students have chosen to study at well-known Polish universities. But despite this expanding Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation, there remains a dearth of scholarship on these developments from academics in both China and Poland. Although many scholars have studied intercollegiate cooperation in Sino-foreign tertiary education, most of these studies are concentrated in the developed West. Central and Eastern European Countries also have high-quality educational resources and courses, but they are rarely studied in depth. Significantly, the research of intercollegiate cooperation in Sino-Poland tertiary education has been little explored.

This research thus seeks to fill this gap in the theory around the specific cross-cultural context of Sino-Poland tertiary education cooperation programs. This paper aims to assess the strengths and challenges of current Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation by answering the following research questions: Can Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation in tertiary education achieve substantial progress and establish a competitive advantage using its current strategies? How can these programs attract more students to join and expand the Sino-Poland tertiary education market? How can existing programs be improved? To address these questions, the well-known "Nicolaus Copernicus University 3 + 1 + 2 intercollegiate cooperation" program is adopted as a case study using an interview-based research method.

In 2017, Nicolaus Copernicus University's Department of Economic Sciences and Management established cooperation with several Chinese universities to offer a "3 + 1 + 2" master's degree program. This means that a student in the program will spend three years studying at a Chinese university, one "foundational

year” studying at Nicolaus Copernicus University in which students are able to transition into their new environment before diving into their master’s studies, and then two years of studies culminating in a master’s degree at Nicolaus Copernicus University. Thus far, thirty-one Chinese students have attended Nicolaus Copernicus University over the past three years.

This paper begins with a literature review that provides background on Sino-foreign intercollegiate cooperation in tertiary education as well as the internationalization of Chinese and Polish tertiary education. The second half of this paper is a case study of the “Nicolaus Copernicus University 3 + 1 + 2 intercollegiate cooperation” model. Finally, an analysis of the content of the interviews is provided and practical suggestions for furthering this and other models are offered.

## 2. Theoretical grounding

### *2.1 The definition and characteristics of Sino-foreign intercollegiate cooperation in tertiary education*

For more than 140 years, Chinese universities have cooperated with other international institutions of higher education. Specifically, Sino-foreign intercollegiate cooperation in education refers to educational initiatives approved by the Chinese government which operate between Chinese educational institutions or other legally recognized social organizations and foreign educational organizations, individuals, or relevant international organizations (Zhong et al., 2012). At present, there are two main types of Sino-foreign intercollegiate cooperation. The first is Sino-foreign cooperation in school management. In this cooperation model, Chinese and foreign educational institutions collaboratively formulate the curriculum, issue diplomas or degree certificates, and implement various educational activities. The other model is Sino-foreign cooperation in exchange programs. Chinese education intermediary companies serve as a bridge for the majority of Sino-foreign exchange activities. This education model uses economic development to facilitate academic cooperation, and is becoming an increasingly popular business model (Feng, 2016). These exchange programs are differentiated from the cooperative school management model in that they deal only with the exchange of students between universities rather than institutional cooperation in developing diploma and degree granting programs. Currently, the majority of Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation falls into the category of exchange programs.

Universities on both ends of these intercollegiate cooperation programs benefit both academically and economically from these exchanges. For many foreign institutions, Chinese citizens are their primary enrollment target. Meanwhile, since China’s reform and opening up period, many Chinese educational institutions have

pursued rapid internationalization of their programs. After more than thirty years of development, Sino-foreign intercollegiate programs have become an essential part of China's tertiary education system (Lu et al., 2013).

## ***2.2 Internalization of Chinese and Polish tertiary education***

The internationalization of tertiary education is a process that combines cross-border and cross-cultural perspectives with the significant functions of university teaching, scientific research, and social services. It is an all-encompassing process of change that is both internal and external, bottom-up and top-down, and alters the institutional framework of both schools in the partnership (Li, 2009). Countries around the world are gradually marketizing international tertiary education, shifting control of academic programs from government oversight to market-based policies and mechanisms (Jongbloed, 2003). Many universities have adopted marketing approaches proven successful in the business world to attract international students and gain a competitive advantage in the international market (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2016).

The internationalization of Chinese tertiary education is intimately connected to national aspirations for modernizing industry, agriculture, defense, science, and technology through economic reforms (Rui, 2014). Internalization is seen as an important indicator for establishing world-class universities and enhancing China's academic competitiveness and international influence. The Chinese government encourages the development of international university exchange programs and partnership projects (Dai, 2020).

This internationalization in Chinese universities is reflected in changes to the development of talent, newly developed curriculums, increased mobility for Chinese students and teachers, and further research and administrative collaboration (Yuan, 2011). To adhere to international standards, the study of English has become a crucial part of Chinese education. Improved English language education is widely viewed as a vital part of national modernization and development (Pan, 2011).

The rapid development of international academic exchanges and scientific research cooperation projects (Chen and Huang, 2013) can be categorized into the following three models: individual cooperation, which refers to cooperation between individual researchers in different countries; program collaboration, meaning the collaboration between two parties centered around one joint program; and an organizational (college-college) partnership, which is described as colleges or universities seeking international cooperation at an institutional level (Xi et al., 2010).

The internationalization of Polish education is connected to a larger European aspiration for increased global academic competitiveness. Poland seeks to increase the mobility of its students while contributing to the European tertiary

education field through the Bologna Process (Oliver et al., 2007). This process aims to increase the reputation of European universities in comparison with American universities through improvements to degree programs across the region. Improving the foundation of European tertiary education guarantees its increased international competitiveness (Liu, 2017). Since joining the Bologna process, Poland has promoted cooperation between tertiary institutions in Poland and other European countries. While European tertiary education policies are gradually converging across the continent and rendering many university programs indistinguishable, Poland has retained many of its own educational characteristics which attract international students. Polish students and academics are also increasingly involved in the framework of many EU projects, making Poland a well-known actor in European academic circles (Oliver et al. 2007).

Sino-Poland international tertiary education cooperation began in the 1950s. On March 21, 2017, “The Belt and Road” China-Poland University Alliance (SPUC) was officially established at the Beijing University of Technology. Twenty-three universities from China and Poland, including more than 50 principals and their guest representatives, jointly participated in the establishment and signing ceremony of the China-Poland University Alliance. Based on the existing cooperation, university resources from both countries will be assembled to respond to China’s “Belt and Road” development initiative and the implementation of the China-Central and Eastern European Countries Education Policy Dialogue (Xiao, 2017). SPUC is non-profit strategic cooperation based on the principles of voluntarism, equality, and open resource community to facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation and innovative development. Students from China and Poland can study at partner institutions in the other country, with language, economics, and engineering attracting many students towards this option.

### 3. Case study analysis

#### 3.1. Method

This section focuses on the case study of the “Nicolaus Copernicus University 3 + 1 + 2 intercollegiate cooperation” program. This program was chosen as a case study because it has been implementing its programming for four years already and has attracted an increasing number of Chinese students. This section aims to assess the strengths and challenges of Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation in tertiary education. The data collection procedure follows semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. *Interviewing* can be defined as a qualitative research technique that involves “conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation” (Boyce and Neale, 2006).

Eleven students were selected as case study respondents to participate in an interview. Respondents belonged to different grade levels, thus leading to different viewpoints about the program. The respondents' grade levels are indicated in Table 1.

Grade levels	No. of respondents
Foundation year	4
First year MA	4
Second year MA	3

**Table 1.** Grade levels of the respondents

Source: authors' own work based on the interviews.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed. The analysis structure followed Saldana's (2021) coding method, combining inductive and deductive coding approaches. Deductive coding is based on the code generated by the researcher code and the interview questions, reflecting the problems contained in the interview scenario. Inductive in vivo coding was performed based on new codes derived from respondents' words (Glińska-Noweś et al., 2019). Interview coding data were divided into the following four categories: (1) motivation for participating in the program, (2) study experience at Chinese and Polish universities, (3) feedback on the program, and (4) suggestions for the program.

### 3.2. Analysis of interview results

#### 3.2.1. Motivation for participating in the program

Chinese students participating in the "Nicolaus Copernicus University 3 + 1 + 2 intercollegiate cooperation" program expressed different motivations for their choice of participation including the following: characteristics of the student (e.g., their needs, perceptions, academic ability), characteristics of the institution/program (e.g., tuition, accommodation, cultural environment), characteristics of the universities (e.g., tuition fees, financial aid, location, reputation), and information and communication between the two universities (e.g., news, advertisements, campus visits) (Fang and Wang, 2014). Understanding students' motivations for participation will help university programs better understand students' needs in order to attract more students in the future. Pressure from China's academic environment was reflected in some respondents' participation motivation. As respondents stated

*It's so difficult to pass the postgraduate admission test in China. There are a huge number of competitors. We usually have to prepare for a whole year for the exam without certainty that we can continue with our studies.* [First year MA student]

*My bachelor university is not well known, but our society focuses so much on university rankings which makes me feel very anxious, so I must have a master's degree.* [Second year MA student]

The cooperation model's novelty and Nicolaus Copernicus University's learning environment was also attractive to some students. For example, respondents stated that:

*The foundation year is a great idea! It combined English language study with business courses and gave me time to familiarize myself with Poland. The best thing about the program is that I feel very safe because it is based on cooperation between Chinese and Polish universities, you know, two official institutions.* [Foundation Year student]

*There is no IELTS requirement to apply for an MA study, I just need to pass the English test provided by the Nicolaus Copernicus University. It's easier.* [First year MA student]

*China is a country with a high demand for all kinds of certificates and certifications, and I am very interested in the AACSB and other certificates within the faculty.* [Second year MA student]

*Poland is located in the European Union and I was able to travel to other countries besides Poland, which broadened my horizons.* [Foundation Year student]

*The cost of living in Poland is not high. It's equivalent to the standard of living in Beijing or Shanghai, which is completely affordable for my family.* [Second year MA student]

### 3.2.2 Study experience at Chinese and Polish universities

As overseas students, respondents mentioned their study experiences in three different contexts: the learning environment, the course curriculum, and the activities of daily life. These perspectives offer informative contributions to furthering intercultural cooperation between Chinese and Polish universities. Respondents noted that the Chinese education system generally has a tighter schedule and higher pressure in the pursuit of knowledge, which was recognized as both a neutral and familiar experience. As stated by respondents:

*Chinese universities have very tight schedules, and we need to have a good habit: of go to the library to study. But it also depends on different students and universities, everyone has different requirements for themselves.* [Second year MA student]

*Students are crazy about the pursuit of different kinds of certificates, such as certificates in English or computer skills, and during the MA study, they must publish in a journal in order to graduate. Perhaps not a particularly outstanding journal, but publication is necessary.* [First year MA student]

*In China, daily life is fun. We had a variety of activities because we were more familiar with the environment.* [Foundation Year student]

At the same time, studying in Poland offers respondents new experiences and allows them to be immersed in a Western education style. They are able to experience a different culture and environment as well as build meaningful relationships with professors. As respondents said

*Polish teachers really like presentations and group work. I think this is a good way to enhance student's theoretical, practical, and communication abilities.* [First year MA student]

*Although Chinese education makes me feel stressed, it still urges me to make progress. Polish education tends to make me more independent. I think it is beneficial in cultivating good habits.* [Foundation Year student]

*I had classmates from all over the world in the class. It was very easy to learn a foreign language in this environment and I feel that my English improved very quickly.* [Foundation Year student]

*Well, it's hard to contact teachers in China. In our culture we are all more afraid of teachers, but teachers in Poland are more accessible, and they will give their email address to us. Really good!* [Second year MA student]

*You can use various learning resources, such as Google, and you can read some foreign language literature.* [Second year MA student]

### 3.2.3 Feedback on the program

Feedback is an indicator of a program's success that can also be used to improve and enhance the program. Respondents gave feedback based on their experience of participating in the program. This section is divided into positive feedback and negative feedback. Themes of positive feedback include how many students have improved their self-worth, how a master's degree makes them more competitive in the job search, and praise for policies favorable to overseas Chinese students returning to China after graduation. As some respondents claimed:

*Studying in Poland has strengthened my language skills and learning ability. After returning to China, I can compete with my better academic qualifications and an excellent resume.* [Second year MA student]

*The experience of studying in Poland may have given me the courage to explore some big cities in China. I will have more opportunities and I can also enjoy some preferential policies unique to overseas Chinese students.* [First year MA student]

*Studying in Poland let me experience a different environment and culture from China, it made me more confident and independent, and broadened my horizons. I loved it.* [Foundation Year student]

*The most attractive thing for me is the preferential policies that China has for us students, such as a tax-free car purchase and a high salary, which are really attractive.* [First year MA student]

However, over the program's four years of implementation, some negative feedback has also emerged. This negative feedback should be valued and used effectively in an effort to improve the program. Themes in negative feedback that stand out include dissatisfaction with the program's declining admissions standards, expensive intermediate agency fees, and concerns about the prestigiousness of Nicolaus Copernicus University in China. Respondents explain these concerns as follows:

*With the decrease in admission standards, I think some students are not qualified to enter Nicolaus Copernicus University to study. I am afraid that these students will affect our reputation.* [Second year MA student]

*The standard of students is unbalanced, and the admissions standard and English tests are basically non-existent. I am concerned that the quality of some students will seriously damage the reputation of this program and university.* [First year MA student]

*I think the information on the program is not good enough. We pay a high agency fee but get very little information.* [Foundation Year student]

*The Nicolaus Copernicus University is not famous in China, and we are not very competitive compared to students who have graduated from universities in the UK or the USA.* [Second year MA student]

#### 3.2.4. Suggestions for the program

In this final interview section, respondents gave suggestions for the “Nicolaus Copernicus University 3 + 1 + 2 intercollegiate cooperation” program. The respondents are eager to study business English and focus on their oral proficiency skills. Although Chinese students start studying English in their childhood, exam-oriented education leads students to focus on English reading and writing. This results in Chinese students having a large vocabulary but still not knowing how to speak. However, respondents feel that the foundation year's English courses are too simple. This lack of a solid English language foundation affects students' comprehension of course material and abilities to articulate their research when continuing into their master's studies. Respondents would also like to see a higher standard for admission into the program. Their suggestion on how to raise the admissions standards is to increase the difficulty of the English test for the foundation year to better screen students' abilities. Finally, the respondents also suggested the addition of more departments that offer degree programs in English in which international Chinese studies could enroll. The respondents' suggestions are as follows:

*I feel that the foundation year English courses are too easy and are very different from the English used in the master's studies. I hope to have business English in my foundation year. [Second year MA student]*

*It is good without IELTS as long as you pass the university's English test. But the English test is too easy, which doesn't work! I am worried about the university's reputation when there are some people who are too bad and didn't work hard but are still studying with me. [First year MA student]*

*Maybe other majors could be offered to attract Chinese students. Our university has different majors. Some Chinese students in other majors are waiting for opportunities. My friend studies biology, and he is also interested in this program. [Foundation Year student]*

#### **4. Discussion**

Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that the “Nicolaus Copernicus University 3 + 1 + 2 intercollegiate cooperation” program has made substantial progress over its four years of existence and displays considerable strengths. From the perspective of a Chinese student, it is an attractive opportunity to study abroad and experience a new culture and learning environment. From the perspective of Nicolaus Copernicus University, the program's success lies in its promising marketing approaches, such as the emphasis on AACSB certificate; its unique cooperation model has also attracted many Chinese universities to enter into a partnership with the program. The program itself has created a unique study model, especially with the inclusion of the foundation year, which gives the program a competitive advantage over other European study abroad programs.

At this early stage of implementation, however, this program still faces many challenges. Based on interviews, we obtained helpful feedback from the respondents to understand and address these shortcomings. The first major challenge is competition with programs in other countries. There are several European countries that have entered into intercollegiate cooperation as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Apart from Poland, other countries such as Russia, France, and Italy have intercollegiate cooperation programs that are attractive for Chinese students. The popularity of a country plays a decisive role in student recruitment, so programs themselves must also market themselves with this competition related to country of origin in mind (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006).

A second major challenge is the lack of long-term, strategic intercollegiate cooperation and the pervasiveness of profit-oriented intermediary companies facilitating exchange student placement (Wang and Dong, 2016). Most Chinese universities outsource the labor of student outreach and placement as well as

cooperation with Polish universities to education intermediaries. The intermediary companies are largely profit-oriented and thus benefit from low academic standards for student recruitment. This leads to a loss of program reputation and often failure in long term cooperation.

This second challenge leads to the inability to attract high-quality students to the program. With low academic requirements and limited English proficiency needed, a drop in admission standards is deterring students from applying to an otherwise quality program. While less strenuous requirements open up faster and more accessible channels for students to study abroad (Li, 2017), it also lowers the quality of participating students.

To better promote the development of Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation, the following four recommendations are made:

(1) Establish a culture of collaborative symbiosis in intercollegiate cooperation

Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation brings together students, faculty, and staff from differing cultural backgrounds. Cultural differences between China and Poland with regards to university management (Liu, 2010) inevitably pose barriers and challenges in the process of student enrollment and management. Therefore, it is imperative to approach the ideological and cultural identities of all universities involved with a spirit of cohesion and cooperation.

(2) Promote unique cooperation between Chinese and Polish faculties

Currently, there is a “lack of market orientation and customer focus,” as international university programs are indeed commodities in a market-based economy. Thus, it is important to approach student recruitment through a business lens and recognize economic theory which suggests that “universities could achieve a competitive advantage if they became more aware of students’ needs and provide that information in these documents” (Mortimer, 1997). This could be done in this case by integrating Poland’s market position into international tertiary education, focusing on students’ needs, and advertising Polish universities’ unique characteristics. These developments in a Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation model would likely attract more Chinese students to study in Poland.

(3) Focus on the internationalization of strategic Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation and enhance the development (training) of international talent

Immediate improvement measures to be taken in this vein include expansion of the international courses being offered, development of courses with unique Sino-Poland characteristics, and further support for improving Chinese students’ English or Polish language abilities. Intermediate to long term actions should include raising overall admissions standards, selecting only the most outstanding students to study abroad, and mutually recognizing and accrediting online courses from partner institutions. These improvements to cooperation in intercollegiate programs will raise the international reputation of Chinese and Polish universities, and fortify the strategic cooperation between universities, international exchanges

and assignments between teachers and students, internationalization of curriculums, and international cooperation in scientific research.

(4) Actively improve the services and support for international student life

This can be accomplished by thoroughly and transparently promoting the project to avoid information gaps for prospective students, establishing an international student management system, offering Polish culture education, organizing student associations, and facilitating smoother integration into life in Poland.

The research provides meaningful theoretical insights into the trajectory of Sino-Poland cooperation in tertiary education. This paper focuses on a specific intercollegiate program, and provides an in-depth study of the cooperation between a Polish and several Chinese universities. This qualitative study investigates the strengths and challenges of this type of cooperation and offers recommendations based on those findings. This study promotes the development of Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation in tertiary education and lays the foundation for future related research. As only one program was used as a case study in this research, future studies should consider conducting parallel research on multiple Sino-Poland tertiary education cooperation programs to broaden the depth and breadth of research in this field.

This research also provides important practical insights into the development of Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation. It offers some guiding opinions from students currently in the program on the cooperation and management approach of the Chinese and Polish partner universities. This research also highlights the negative impact of profit-driven student selection and the impact of this approach to the reputations of the universities involved. Finally, interviews also revealed the importance of cultural competency in implementing this program and point to ways in which Polish universities can better support the physical and mental health of their international Chinese students.

## 5. Conclusion

While Chinese scholars have studied other cases of international intercollegiate cooperation, most of these researches focused on more developed countries such as Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Eastern European countries like Poland, which also have high-quality educational resources and programs, are ignored in the existing literature. This lack of research makes it hard for both academics and prospective students alike to find relevant information on Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation. Through interviews of Chinese students studying in Poland combined with an analysis of broader theory on tertiary education, this paper fills a gap in the research on Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation as well as the larger field of Sino-foreign intercollegiate cooperation. The findings of this research suggest that Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation

has been relatively successful thus far. A unique cooperation model along with innovative studying abroad offerings make Polish university programs attractive to Chinese students. There has been an increase in the number of Chinese students studying in Poland and more cooperation has been developed between Chinese and Polish universities. However, challenges have also emerged. Profit-oriented student recruitment practices have led to a decline in admission standards, cultural differences between the Chinese and Polish education systems pose a barrier to adaption and integration of Chinese students in Poland, and competition from other European university programs overshadow lesser-known Poland. Key points to consider in further developing a competitive Sino-Poland intercollegiate cooperation program include finding a balance between project profitability and student quality, developing a culturally sensitive cooperation model, and adapting the curriculums to address political, economic, and cultural developments.

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