

# Exploring Overseas Education: The Role and Challenges of Higher Vocational Colleges in the "Belt and Road" Framework

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**Abstract:** This study explores the development trends of overseas education in higher vocational colleges in the context of the "Belt and Road" initiative. Firstly, it introduces the "Belt and Road" initiative as an important framework for international cooperation, aiming to promote economic cooperation and connectivity among countries along the route. Subsequently, it discusses the basic situation of overseas education in higher vocational colleges, including development stages, policy formulation, establishment of communication platforms, and advantages. The study examines the impact of the development environment for overseas education, including China's modernization planning in education and policies on educational opening-up. The analysis identifies challenges faced by higher vocational colleges in overseas education, such as cross-cultural adaptation and language barriers, teaching quality and recognition, market demand and alignment of professions, financial and resource limitations, as well as management and operational challenges. Finally, strategies for the development of overseas education in higher vocational colleges are proposed, including strengthening cross-cultural training and language support, enhancing teaching quality and degree recognition, gaining a deep understanding of local market demands and professional alignment, exploring multiple channels for fundraising and resource acquisition, and establishing sound management systems and operational mechanisms. Looking ahead, the study indicates that overseas education in higher vocational colleges has vast development prospects. It can meet the demand for vocational talents in countries along the route, promote international exchanges and cooperation, and make significant contributions to global talent development and economic cooperation.

**Keywords:** Higher Vocational Colleges; Belt and Road; Overseas Education; Development Trends; International Cooperation.

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and economic cooperation, the "Belt and Road" initiative proposed by China has become an important framework for international cooperation. The initiative aims to promote economic cooperation and connectivity among countries along the route, facilitating regional development and prosperity. In this context, overseas education by higher vocational colleges has become an integral part of implementing the "Belt and Road" strategy.

Higher vocational colleges have the advantage of cultivating applied and skilled talents, and their educational and training programs can meet the vocational skills and talent demands of local countries. By establishing branch campuses or cooperative programs in countries along the Belt and Road, higher vocational colleges can provide high-quality vocational education that meets international standards to local students. This promotes educational cooperation, personnel mobility, and enhances academic and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, fostering friendly cooperation. Therefore, studying overseas education by higher vocational colleges in the context of the "Belt and Road" initiative holds significant theoretical and practical significance. By conducting in-depth analysis to understand the motivations, modes of cooperation, curriculum offerings, and the impact on local education and social development, valuable insights and references can be provided for the overseas education endeavors of higher vocational colleges. Moreover, it can offer beneficial experiences and inspirations for the implementation of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

## 2. Stages of Development in Overseas Education

### 2.1. Development Stage of Exploration and Adjustment

The first stage (late 1980s to early 21st century) marks the initial phase of overseas education for Chinese higher vocational colleges. With the advancement of the "going global" strategy, the internationalization of vocational education became a significant feature. Through cooperative programs with domestic and foreign institutions, the development of multi-level vocational education and training, and the cultivation of talents needed by Chinese companies overseas, efforts were made to enhance the international influence and competitiveness of Chinese vocational education. During this period, Chinese higher vocational colleges primarily explored overseas education through cooperative projects with foreign institutions. At the time, secondary vocational education witnessed rapid expansion, with the number of students increasing from 3 million in 1980 to 12 million in 1990. The types of secondary vocational education diversified, covering various fields such as industry, agriculture, commerce, healthcare, and culture. Additionally, the quality of secondary vocational education also improved, nurturing a group of skilled technicians with practical skills and innovative spirit. However, due to the lack of experience in overseas education and management mechanisms, the achievements in overseas education during this period were not significant.

## **2.2. Emphasis on Connotative Development Period**

From the early 21st century to the early 2010s, overseas education by Chinese higher vocational colleges underwent further development, establishing a relatively sound management mechanism and engaging in cooperative efforts with overseas institutions through various means, achieving scale and diversified development. At the same time, vocational education developed in terms of both scale and connotation. In the 1990s, China underwent the transition period to a socialist market economy, facing challenges in economic restructuring and employment pressure. The scale of secondary vocational education in China remained relatively stable, fluctuating around 12 million between 1990 and 2000. The connotation began to take shape as Chinese higher vocational colleges gradually established a relatively sound management mechanism for overseas education. They explored cooperation with overseas institutions through various means and achieved scale and diversified development in overseas education. Emphasis was placed on improving students' comprehensive qualities and adaptability, and international exchanges and cooperation were gradually carried out through various forms of collaboration with international organizations, foreign governments, institutions, and enterprises.

## **2.3. Deepening and Enhancing Development Period**

The deepening and enhancing development period began in the 2010s and continues to the present. During this period, Chinese higher vocational colleges increased investment and management in overseas education. Measures such as establishing their own overseas education brand, introducing international advanced educational resources, and promoting international talent cultivation were taken to actively promote the internationalization, specialization, and branding of overseas education. Chinese higher vocational colleges also strengthened in-depth cooperation with overseas institutions, achieving discipline, faculty, and resource sharing, continuously improving the quality and influence of overseas education. The core task of vocational education is to improve quality. By reforming management methods, improving supporting policies, strengthening faculty construction, and innovating teaching methods, the quality level and social recognition of vocational education are enhanced. Since the 21st century, China has entered a new era of comprehensively building a moderately prosperous society and accelerating socialist modernization. The demand for highly skilled technical talents has become more urgent. The secondary vocational education system has been initially formed, including general senior high schools, regular secondary vocational schools, adult senior high schools, vocational schools (including schools for children of migrant workers), and other types of training institutions. The connotation of secondary vocational education has been comprehensively deepened, emphasizing employment orientation, market basis, integration of production and education, and innovation-driven development. The strategy of "going global" for secondary vocational education is implemented, actively participating in the Belt and Road Initiative and international capacity cooperation, and carrying out various forms of cooperation and joint education in Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and other regions.

## **3. Basic Situation of Overseas Education by Higher Vocational Colleges**

### **3.1. Formulation of Policies for Overseas Education by Higher Vocational Colleges**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's higher vocational education has developed rapidly and has become an important part of building a strong education nation. Based on the spirit of documents such as the "National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)," the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance proposed the implementation of the "Double High Plan" for high-level higher vocational schools and programs in 2019. The "Double High Plan" is based on the actual situation of China's higher vocational education, starting from the overall development of the economy and society. It outlines the direction for the modernization of higher vocational education in China through project-driven approaches, establishing construction standards for the positioning, connotation enhancement, and characteristic development of higher vocational colleges. Under the background of the "Double High Plan," internationalization of education has become an organic part of the new development of higher vocational colleges, and the cultivation of international talents has become inevitable.[1] The Chinese government encourages higher vocational colleges to engage in overseas education to enhance the international influence of Chinese vocational education. Several government departments, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have issued a series of policy documents supporting the overseas education endeavors of higher vocational colleges, such as the "Several Opinions on the Opening-up of Education in the New Era." Overseas education is an important component of educational internationalization. It refers to the cooperation between domestic universities and foreign universities or social organizations with legal personality to provide higher education or non-degree higher education to foreign citizens. The main forms of overseas education include the establishment of branch campuses and joint curriculum programs, all of which help domestic higher vocational colleges enhance their international influence.[2] China has been implementing engineering education accreditation since 2006 and joined the "Washington Accord" in 2016, achieving international recognition of engineering education and qualifications. This has greatly enhanced the international competitiveness of China's engineering education. Therefore, it is also an urgent need for China to establish and improve the international vocational qualification certification system. The "Sydney Accord," established in 2001, is an agreement for the accreditation of engineering technologists and engineering technical programs. Its accreditation rules and procedures are similar to the "Washington Accord," but the scope of accreditation is entirely different, focusing on technicians and technical professions.[3] China should join this accord as soon as possible and carry out accreditation work in higher vocational colleges. According to the "Notice of the Ministry of Education and Four Other Departments on Implementing the Special Training Program for On-site Engineers in Vocational Education," it is stated that by 2025, at least 200,000 on-site engineers will be trained cumulatively, which will further accelerate alignment with international standards. As

vocational colleges, efforts should be made to internationalize the concept of running schools, the management model, the faculty team, and the curriculum content.

## **3.2. Establishment of Overseas Exchange Platforms for Higher Vocational Colleges**

In recent years, the internationalization process of vocational education in China has accelerated. In addition to enrolling international students, there has been an increasing trend of establishing educational institutions overseas. The "Overseas Luban Workshop" in Tianjin, for example, has been established in 20 countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe, [4] serving as an important window for international exchanges and a new driving force for talent development in "Belt and Road" countries, showcasing the internationalization of vocational education.[5] Currently, the research on international talent cultivation in higher vocational colleges in China has limitations and biases. Most studies are confined to exploring the methods and paths of cultivating talents in specific fields, without considering the overall perspective of international talent development in schools. Moreover, due to different observation perspectives, some researchers still believe that there are problems such as unclear concepts and inadequate planning in the international talent cultivation of schools. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the objective problems existing in the international talent cultivation of higher vocational colleges, in order to enable targeted measures and strengthen the cultivation of international talents.

## **3.3. Advantages of Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges in Overseas Education**

### **3.3.1. Strong Demand and Policy Incentives in Host Countries**

In today's world, the main driving force for promoting economic growth in various countries increasingly relies on scientific and technological progress and the cultivation of innovative talents. Countries such as China, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have experienced rapid economic development but have relatively low levels of higher education and still lag behind developed countries in terms of scientific and technological contributions and competitiveness of research personnel. These countries urgently hope to improve their higher education levels, cultivate internationally competent innovative talents, and drive economic development through the introduction of high-quality resources from world-class universities. The Singaporean government proposed the "Ten Top Universities Plan" in 1998, aiming to attract 10 world-class universities to establish branches in Singapore within 10 years, in order to enhance the education and research level of local universities and make Singapore a "Regional Education Center." So far, more than 20 world-renowned institutions have established branches in Singapore, including three among the top 100 world-class universities. In Qatar, the government provides not only facilities and funding but also pays for teacher salaries and management costs to attract world-class universities to establish branches.[6]

### **3.3.2. Enhancement of Reputation and Economic Benefits**

The reduction in financial allocations for universities in English-speaking countries has become a driving force for establishing overseas branches. These universities aim to

increase tuition revenue by attracting more international students. As prominent higher education scholar Altbach pointed out, the main motivation for establishing overseas branches comes from earning tuition fees. Taking the example of New York University in Shanghai, the tuition fee is as high as 100,000 RMB, which is more than 10 times the average tuition fee of domestic universities. A significant portion of these high tuition fees is used to pay the salaries of foreign teachers.[7] Therefore, establishing branches can bring direct economic benefits. However, for prestigious universities, the establishment of overseas branches is more important in improving their international reputation and meeting the demand for internationalization from domestic students. By providing high-quality higher education to local students through the establishment of overseas branches, the reputation of the exporting country's higher education institutions can be better disseminated in the host country, gaining higher "brand" recognition in the increasingly competitive international higher education market. For New York University, establishing a branch in Abu Dhabi is part of its global higher education brand strategy.[8]

### **3.3.3. Alleviation of Brain Drain and Talent Hubs**

By attracting world-class universities to establish branches in their own countries, brain drain can be effectively reduced. On the one hand, for domestic students, there is no need to go through cumbersome visa procedures, and they can obtain a degree from a world-class university at a low cost, and most of them will also work in their home country after graduation. On the other hand, the brand effect of world-class universities not only attracts domestic students but also students from all over the world, contributing to the economic development of the home country. Of course, the quality of overseas branches is crucial.[9] Donald's research shows that if the quality of the overseas branch is good enough, only a small number of students will be willing to study abroad, thus alleviating the brain drain. Conversely, if the quality of the overseas branch is not high, or even lower than the quality of domestic universities, then the overseas branch will have little effect.[10]

### **3.3.4. Facilitating Deeper International Exchanges and Cooperation**

The establishment of overseas branches benefits both the host and exporting countries by strengthening international exchanges among students and teachers. In the context of today's globalization of the world economy, students are eager to learn new knowledge and perspectives from around the world and gain knowledge of politics, economics, and cultures of other countries and ethnicities in order to acquire survival and competitive abilities in the international society.[11] The establishment of overseas branches enables more extensive and frequent international exchanges. By providing teachers and students with more international experience, American students can gain an advantage in global economic competition, which has become a core mission of many American institutions. Branch campus managers say that overseas campuses serve this purpose.

## **4. Research on the Impact of the Development Environment for Overseas Education in Higher Vocational Colleges**

### **4.1. China's Education Modernization 2035**

"China's Education Modernization 2035" is a document

issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council of China. It is divided into five parts: strategic background, overall thinking, strategic tasks, implementation path, and guarantee measures. Education modernization has become the starting point of national education development strategy and education reform direction. It is based on the "Three Orientations" proposed by Comrade Deng Xiaoping in 1983, which are education oriented towards modernization, the world, and the future. Subsequently, policy documents such as "China's Education Reform and Development Outline," "China's Education Modernization 2035," and "Accelerating the Implementation Plan for Education Modernization (2018-2022)" have been introduced, providing abundant momentum for the long-term development of education modernization at the highest level. Chinese-style education modernization is a high-standard, high-level, and high-quality education modernization, which is an important component and fundamental strategic support of Chinese-style modernization. High-quality development is the theme of China's education in the new era and the essential requirement of Chinese-style education modernization. Promoting Chinese-style education modernization through high-quality development and building a new pattern of high-quality development is not only a strategic choice for Chinese-style education modernization but also a process that serves the high-quality development of the national economy and society, the comprehensive development of individuals, and the provision of satisfactory education for the people.[12]

## **4.2. Implementation Plan for Education Modernization**

Chinese-style education modernization is consistent with the process of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the socialist modernization construction process in China, and the strategic goals of the "Two Centenary Goals." From 1840 to 2049, Chinese-style education modernization has gone through history, from history to reality, and then to the future. "2035" proposes the construction of a Chinese-style teacher education system, with teacher ethics and professional conduct as the first criteria for evaluating teacher quality.[13] Efforts should be made to improve the political, social, and professional status of teachers and build a high-quality, professional, and innovative teacher team. Strengthen the continuing education and social training services of vocational schools and higher education institutions, carry out various types and forms of continuing education for staff in government agencies, enterprises, and institutions, implement education actions for rural revitalization strategies, and expand the supply of community education resources.[14]

Education modernization refers to the combination of advanced science and technology, educational concepts, and educational practices to meet the needs of modern society and the economy, and provide students with comprehensive, high-quality, and competitive education. It is necessary to improve the level of teacher training and cultivate a high-quality teacher team, allowing teachers to master modern teaching concepts and methods and continuously update their knowledge and skills.[15] Promote information technology education; the key to education modernization is the application of information technology. Promote electronic education, online learning, distance education, and other modern teaching methods to make it more convenient for students to acquire knowledge. Reform curriculum design; redesign and organize the curriculum, making the content

more relevant to the needs of modern society and the economy, while emphasizing the cultivation of students' innovative thinking and practical abilities. Establish a modern education management system to achieve informatization and intelligence in education management and improve the efficiency of educational resource utilization. Strengthen international cooperation; enhance cooperation with foreign educational institutions, introduce advanced educational concepts and technologies from abroad, and improve the international competitiveness of China's education. Strengthen family education; establish a family education system, involve parents in student education, and increase parental attention and support for students. Promote lifelong education; make education a lifelong pursuit for individuals, promote lifelong education, improve people's quality and abilities, and meet the needs of modern society.

## **4.3. Opinions on Education Opening to the Outside World**

China has been actively promoting the opening of education to the outside world, which is an important part of the reform and opening up endeavor, as well as a significant feature and driving force for education modernization. General Secretary Xi Jinping has continuously put forward the overall requirements of expanding educational openness and enhancing the global influence of Chinese education since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. He has insisted on serving the country's opening-up through education opening to the outside world, enabling Chinese education to take a more open, confident, and proactive approach on the world stage. General Secretary Xi Jinping's important discourse on education opening to the outside world points out that education should gather talents from all over the world, strengthen mutual understanding, learning, and communication with countries worldwide, and make education a service for the inheritance and creation of civilization, jointly creating a better future. The core essence of education opening to the outside world lies in realizing it through declaring the country's openness, promoting cultural exchanges, shaping new forms of civilization, and cultivating innovative talents.[16] Under the guidance of General Secretary Xi Jinping, the layout of education opening to the outside world in China has been continuously optimized. The innovation and development of study abroad work have been enhanced, the capacity to serve talent cultivation has been strengthened, humanistic exchanges have become more enriching, and participation in global educational governance has deepened. General Secretary Xi Jinping's important discourse on education opening to the outside world is an integral part of Xi Jinping's diplomatic thought. It enriches and develops the educational theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, providing important guidelines for promoting high-level education opening to the outside world. Education opening to the outside world refers to conducting international exchanges and cooperation, introducing advanced educational concepts, technologies, experiences, and resources from abroad, improving China's educational level, and promoting the modernization of Chinese education. Education opening to the outside world is an important strategic measure for the development of China's education modernization. It requires joint efforts from all parties to promote the integration of China's education with international standards and inject new momentum into the sustained development of China's education cause. At the

same time, in the process of education opening to the outside world, it is necessary to pay attention to protecting the cultural characteristics and national interests of China's education. Strengthening cooperation with international educational institutions, absorbing international advanced educational experience and resources to support the development of China's education modernization; promoting internationalization of higher education, encouraging universities to carry out international education, recruiting and nurturing international students and teachers, and enhancing the internationalization level of China's higher education; promoting internationalization of primary and secondary education, encouraging primary and secondary schools to carry out internationalized curriculum and exchange activities, improving students' international perspectives and cross-cultural communication abilities; enhancing education export, encouraging educational enterprises and universities to engage in education export business, and promoting the internationalization of China's education services; strengthening international exchanges of teachers, encouraging teachers to participate in international educational seminars, academic exchanges, and other activities to improve their teaching level and abilities; promoting student exchanges, encouraging students to participate in international exchange activities, broaden their horizons, enhance their awareness of international cooperation, and improve their cross-cultural communication abilities.

## **5. Challenges Faced by Higher Vocational Colleges in the Development of Overseas Education**

The development of overseas education by higher vocational colleges is confronted with various challenges, including cross-cultural adaptation and language barriers, teaching quality and recognition, market demand and professional alignment, financial and resource limitations, as well as management and operational challenges. Higher vocational colleges need to actively address these challenges and take effective measures to ensure the quality and sustainable development of overseas education.

### **5.1. Cross-cultural Adaptation and Language Barriers**

Higher vocational colleges engaged in overseas education need to cope with cultural differences and language barriers in different countries and regions. Teachers and students may encounter difficulties in adapting to the overseas teaching environment due to cross-cultural challenges, and language communication may also become a barrier to teaching and learning.

### **5.2. Teaching Quality and Recognition**

Teaching quality and degree recognition are significant challenges in the overseas education of higher vocational colleges. In some countries, especially developed ones, there may be gaps between the higher vocational education system and curriculum design and international standards, leading to doubts about the recognition of degrees obtained through overseas education. Enhancing teaching quality and degree recognition is a key issue for the development of overseas education by higher vocational colleges.

### **5.3. Market Demand and Professional Alignment**

Higher vocational colleges engaged in overseas education need to align with local market demand and professional requirements by offering programs that meet the needs of the local employment market. However, understanding and aligning with the local market can be challenging and requires market research and collaboration with local businesses to ensure that the programs offered can produce graduates who meet the local employment market's needs.

### **5.4. Financial and Resource Limitations**

Engaging in overseas education requires a substantial investment of funds and resources for higher vocational colleges, including the construction of teaching facilities, recruitment of excellent faculty, and procurement of teaching resources and materials. However, the funds and resources required for overseas education are often relatively limited. Higher vocational colleges need to find effective solutions within these resource constraints to ensure the sustainable development of overseas education.

### **5.5. Management and Operational Challenges**

Higher vocational colleges engaged in overseas education also face management and operational challenges, including collaboration and coordination with local partners, management and operation of overseas campuses, and the development and management of the faculty. Addressing these management and operational challenges requires the establishment of a comprehensive management system and operational mechanisms by higher vocational colleges to ensure the smooth implementation of overseas education.

## **6. Strategies and Prospects for the Development of Overseas Education in Vocational Colleges**

The development of overseas education in vocational colleges faces challenges such as cross-cultural adaptation and language barriers, teaching quality and degree recognition, market demand and professional alignment, funding and resource limitations, as well as management and operational challenges. Vocational colleges need to actively address these challenges and take effective measures to ensure the quality and sustainable development of overseas education.

### **6.1. Cross-cultural Adaptation and Language Barriers**

Vocational colleges conducting overseas education need to address cultural differences and language barriers in different countries and regions. Teachers and students may face difficulties in adapting to the overseas teaching environment and language communication may become a barrier to teaching and learning.

### **6.2. Teaching Quality and Degree Recognition**

The teaching quality and degree recognition of vocational colleges conducting overseas education are important challenges. In some countries, especially developed countries, there may be gaps between the vocational education system and curriculum offerings and international standards, leading to doubts about the recognition of degrees obtained through

overseas education. Enhancing teaching quality and degree recognition is a key issue in the development of overseas education in vocational colleges.

### 6.3. Market Demand and Professional Alignment

Vocational colleges conducting overseas education need to align with local market demand and professional requirements by offering courses that meet the local employment market needs. However, understanding and aligning with the local market pose certain difficulties, requiring market research and collaboration with local enterprises to ensure that the offered programs can produce graduates who meet the demands of the local employment market.

### 6.4. Funding and Resource Limitations

Vocational colleges conducting overseas education require significant investment in funds and resources, including the construction of teaching facilities, recruitment of excellent faculty, and the purchase of teaching resources and materials. However, the funds and resources required for overseas education are often relatively limited. Vocational colleges need to find effective solutions in situations of limited resources to ensure the sustainable development of overseas education.

### 6.5. Management and Operational Challenges

Vocational colleges conducting overseas education also face challenges in management and operations. This includes cooperation and coordination with local partners, management and operation of overseas campuses, and the development and management of faculty teams. These management and operational challenges require vocational colleges to establish sound management systems and operational mechanisms to ensure the smooth operation of overseas education. Looking ahead, the development prospects of overseas education in vocational colleges are promising. With the advancement of the "Belt and Road" initiative, the demand for vocational education in countries along the route will continue to grow. Vocational colleges have flexibility and adaptability in overseas education, enabling them to quickly respond to local needs and market changes, and provide professionals who meet the demands of local economic development. At the same time, overseas education in vocational colleges can promote international exchanges and cooperation, enhancing mutual understanding and collaboration between different countries and regions. By improving the quality of education and degree recognition, overseas education in vocational colleges has the potential to become an international education platform that attracts more students and teachers, making significant contributions to global talent development and economic cooperation.

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