Research on the Internationalization Development and Cooperation Path of Higher Education Between Turkey and China

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Abstract. In recent years, with the irreversible trend of internationalization worldwide, the internationalization of higher education is a key direction of China’s education in the future. Given the current situation of political, economic, and social development in Balkan countries, Turkey strongly desires to develop its internationalization of higher education. This paper will explore the internationalization development status of higher education between Turkey and China, based on which their cooperation path of higher education is summarized.

1. Introduction

With the increasingly fierce international competition, the demand for international talent is on the rise in various countries. Internationalization of higher education, as one of the important measures to cultivate international talent, has been widely valued by many countries. China and Turkey, both developing countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, have something in common in cultural background and internationalization promotion of higher education. In addition to exploring the current situation of internationalization of higher education in Turkey and China, this paper analyzes their characteristics of higher education development, which further discusses the path of their higher education cooperation and puts forwards some suggestions for their future promotion in this regard.

2. Current Situation of Internationalization of Higher Education

2.1 International Exchange of Students

As for the inflow of students, the number of international students in China and Turkey is on the rise. Before 2010, the number of international students in Turkey was stable at about 16,000. However, after 2010, the number increased year by year and exceeded 220,000 in 2021, about ten times that of ten years ago. Since 2006, the number of international students admitted to China has constantly increased. In 2014, China became the second favorite destination for African students to study abroad. In 2019, the number of international students in China ranked tenth in the world, an increase of 12.85% compared with 2018 [1]. More Chinese students studying abroad are highly intertwined with the continuous improvement of China’s economic strength and educational competence. The deep reason lies in the recognition of China’s comprehensive national strength by the international community, which is related to a series of measures implemented by China in recent years to enhance the international influence of Chinese universities. For example, the construction of “Double-First-Class” disciplines and universities in China came into being in 2017. At present, the list of its second round has been published. The continuous implementation of “Double-First-Class” construction provides an official guarantee for the quality and influence of Chinese university education. The increase in the number of international students in Turkey is also largely attributed to its governmental emphasis on the internationalization of higher education. In order to intensify the attraction of the country’s higher education institutions for more international students, the Turkish government has introduced various incentives. For example, Türkiye Scholarships, the country’s largest scholarship program, attracted 165,691 applicants from 171 different countries in 2022, setting a new record for the country to attract international undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies [2].

From the perspective of the students’ source country, Turkish international students mainly come from West Asia and Eastern Europe, while the number of European and American students studying in Turkey is small. In recent years, affected by the civil war in Syria, Syria has become the country with the most international students in Turkey. In the school year of 2017 and 2018, 20,701 Syrian students went to Turkey to study, followed by students from Azerbaijan (17,088), Turkmenistan (12,247), and Iraq (5,187) [3], while Chinese international students mainly came from developing countries such as Asia and Europe. Among the international students in China in 2016,
59.84% were Asian students and 16.11% were European. South Korea has 70,540 students studying in China, which is the country with the most international students in China, followed by students from the United States (23,838), Thailand (23,044), Pakistan (18,626), India (18,717), Russia (17,971), Indonesia (14,714), and Kazakhstan (13,996) [4]. Concerning the source distribution of international students, the cultural closeness brought by geographical proximity undoubtedly plays a key role.

From the perspective of outbound countries, their number of Turkish international students is ranked from high to low as the United States, Germany, Britain, Italy, Austria, and Azerbaijan. The ranking of Chinese students’ studying countries is the United States, Australia, Britain, Japan, Canada, and South Korea [5]. It can be seen that students from both countries when choosing to study abroad prefer developed countries with abundant educational resources such as Europe and America, or neighboring countries for consideration of less cultural differences and costs. It is worth mentioning that China has been the largest source of international students in the United States in the last decade, while this number and proportion have declined in recent years. On the one hand, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, international students postpone or cancel their plans to go abroad because of health concerns. On the other hand, they’re affected by the Sino-US tension. On May 29, 2020, former US President Trump signed the Presidential Announcement on the Suspension of Entry as Non-immigrant of Certain Students and Researchers From the People’s Republic of China, so as to impose a series of entry restrictions on non-immigrant students and researchers who are considered by the United States to be implementing or supporting China’s “development strategy of civil-military integration” [6]. The current Biden administration continues to implement this restrictive policy. Under the present situation where the education of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is popular for Chinese international students, this unfriendly policy of studying abroad and visa has greatly undercut the enthusiasm for studying in the United States.

As for the cities where international students study, international students in Turkey are mainly distributed in the northwest and southwest of the country. Istanbul, Ankara, Eskisehir, Bursa, and Konya are the five Turkish cities most loved by international students [3]. International students in China are mainly distributed in the eastern region, while the number of international students in the central and western regions is relatively small. The cities with the most international students in China are Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang successively [4]. Thus, international students from China and Turkey have obvious regional preferences for cities to study abroad, which is related to the sharp differences in regional economic development and the distribution of research universities in both countries.

2.2 International Exchange Programme

2.2.1 Erasmus Programme

Erasmus Programme is an exchange programme for college students initiated by the European Community in 1987, which provides funds and establishes the connection between universities to promote the communication of talents. In 2003, Turkey joined the Erasmus Programme, after which Turkish universities carried out major reforms in curriculum, teaching language, credit recognition, etc. to attract more overseas students, achieving remarkable results. In 2014, the EU developed the Erasmus+ Programme with wider coverage based on the previous one, with the participating countries no longer limited to European regions. According to the data, the total budget of the Erasmus+ Programme in 2021 is 2.9 billion euros, involving 19,000 projects, about 71,000 organizations, and 649,000 participants in mobile activities [7]. With the expansion of the Erasmus Programme, the internationalization of higher education in Turkey has also been further developed.

From 2004 to 2017, a total of 149,223 Turkish college students were exchanged abroad through the Erasmus Programme, with this number showing an upward trend. In 2004, only 1,142 Turkish students exchanged abroad through this program, while it climbed to 17,902 in 2017. In the past decade, 55,667 foreign students have studied in Turkey through the Erasmus Programme. Although it has shown a downward trend since 2014, compared with 299 international students in 2004, the Erasmus Programme in 2017 enabled 2,785 foreign students to study in Turkey, which is about ten times that of 2004 [8].

2.2.2 Mevlana Exchange Programme

The Mevlana Exchange Programme is issued by the Turkish government to exchange students and academics between national and international higher education institutions, which is currently the second largest international exchange program in Turkey. Students can study abroad for one (at least) or two (at most) semesters, and academics can give lectures abroad for one week (at least) to three months (at most) [9]. In addition to exempting students from tuition and accommodation fees, this programme also provides a certain amount of exchange subsidies. During the course period within the exchange program, students do not need to pay any tuition or additional fees to the receiving institutions except the compulsory tuition fees paid to the domestic institutions [10]. In order to ensure the smooth implementation of the exchange program, the Turkish government issued the Mevlana Regulations on August 23, 2011, to regulate the operating procedures and principles of the exchange program [11].

The statute states that the persons who benefit from the programme include students of formal education courses of the associate degree, bachelor degree, master’s degree, and doctoral degree registered in Turkish higher education institutions (which have signed bilateral Mevlana exchange agreements), as well as all academics working
in domestic or foreign higher education institutions (under the above conditions). In order to ensure the quality of the exchange program, the regulations also comprehensively stipulate the academic activity lasting time of academics within the exchange range. For example, the weekly academic activities should not be less than six hours (the course time is also included in the evaluation scope). If the course lasts less than six hours, academic activities such as seminars, groups, or conferences are evaluated [12]. In 2013, the programme began to be implemented based on the Mevlana Exchange Program Agreement [13]. As of 2014, a total of 54 universities in Turkey have signed cooperation agreements with universities in 41 countries, including China. Chinese universities participating in the programme include top domestic universities such as the Renmin University of China, China University of Political Science and Law, and Peking University [14].

2.3 Related Programme of China Scholarship Council

In 1996, China Scholarship Council was established as an institution under the Ministry of Education, subsidizing and managing Chinese citizens studying abroad and foreign citizens studying in China. In 2021, the number of students studying abroad sent by the China Scholarship Council was 14,000, which recovered to nearly 50% before the epidemic and doubled in 2020. There are more than 11,000 students studying in China who have received scholarships from the Chinese government, of which 88% are students with academic qualifications and 71% are graduate students [15]. The high-level public program of studying abroad is jointly undertaken by the China Scholarship Council and the Ministry of Education, which was officially launched in 2007. Meanwhile, the number and the scale of selected students are on the rise. However, the program still mainly covers European and American countries [16].

3. Curriculum Internationalization

3.1 Courses on International Themes

In recent years, Turkey has vigorously promoted the development of higher education towards high-level internationalization. Besides, many courses in conformity with the curriculum internationalization have been widely established in various universities. On the whole, Turkey has made good achievements in the internationalization of higher education. For example, Koch University in Turkey offers a major in political science and international relations, providing degrees of bachelor, master, and doctorate in international relations. Its complete professional training system can fully meet the needs of students with different educational degrees. Students in this major can choose courses from the main sub-fields of international politics, comparative government, Turkish politics, and political theory [17].

Many colleges and universities in China also pay more attention to the courses related to cross-cultural ability and add abundant related courses. As for comparative literature, the Comparative Literature Department of the School of International Chinese Studies at East China Normal University was established on December 11, 2021, which is the only Comparative Literature Department in China that recruits undergraduates and establishes an integrated training mechanism for comparative literature [18]. Its establishment marks the exploration of Chinese universities to give full play to the teaching resources of Chinese and foreign languages, which is a bold practice to break down discipline barriers and change the existing humanities pattern, fully embodying the innovation consciousness of national cultural strategy. Meanwhile, the internationalization of university courses in philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics has not been completed. For example, the international level of ideological and political education, the history of the Communist Party of China, Marxist studies, etc. is not high [19].

3.2 Mutual Recognition of Credits and Diplomas

Since 2002, Turkey has joined the Bologna Process to establish closer relations with European countries on higher education. Besides, the Turkish Higher Education Council encourages universities to change the credit system to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). At present, most Turkish universities have applied ECTS to the scoring system and set different ECTS credit requirements for different degree courses and exchange programs in specific implementation [20].

According to the data released by the Ministry of Education, 188 countries and regions have established educational cooperation and exchange relations with China by 2020, which signed more than 1,000 bilateral and multilateral agreements and implementation plans about educational cooperation and exchange. In addition, China has reached cooperation in educational exchanges with 46 important international organizations, including UNESCO. A total of 54 countries have signed agreements on mutual recognition of higher education degrees with China [21], including Germany, Britain, France, Australia, and other countries with high degree of curriculum internationalization. It also shows the further in-depth educational cooperation and exchanges between China and other countries worldwide, and the improving recognition of China’s higher education in the international community. In June 2020, The Ministry of Education and Other Eight Departments Issued Opinions to Speed Up and Expand the Opening Up of Education in the New Era was officially issued, which highlighted the important role played by mutual recognition of credits and degrees between China and foreign countries in enhancing the international influence of China’s higher education, providing guarantee for students to take transnational optional courses [22].

3.3 Educational Resources Sharing and Distance Education

With the in-depth economic globalization and Internet
technology development, the concept of teaching resources sharing of the curriculum has been constantly popularized. In the internationalization of higher education, the teaching resources sharing of the high-quality curriculum at home and abroad also spread ideas, methods, and models of teaching, which play an important role in curriculum internationalization. The emergence of MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) in 2012 is the product of the combination of Internet technology and higher education.

The development of MOOCs in Turkey is still in its infancy. Only a few universities, including Anadolu University and Ataturk University, provide MOOCs. These two universities are also the main providers of MOOCs in Turkey. Both of them launched their own MOOC platforms at the end of 2014 and opened their first courses in 2015. For example, Anadolu University has started to offer eight courses mainly about social sciences and humanities, and its customized MOOC platform is AKADEMA. Nowadays, the platform provides 48 Turkish courses and 1 English course. The University of Anadolu has also made several attempts to expand open resources through online portals and OER projects.[25]

When the COVID-19 epidemic broke out at the beginning of 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued guidance on online teaching, proposing to “suspend class but not stop studying”. In that year, 1.08 million college teachers offered more than 1.1 million courses, with more than 22.6 million students participating. By the end of February 2022, there were more than 50,000 online massive open online courses in China. Nearly 800 million optional courses and more than 300 million students received credits of massive open online courses.[24]

During the epidemic, China actively carried out online teaching exchanges and cooperation with foreign governments, platforms, and universities. Dozens of Chinese courses have used edX, Coursera, AMEE, and other platforms to deal with the distance teaching project against the epidemic. Led by Tsinghua University, universities around the world share online teaching (“cloud sharing”) and related experiences with representatives of ten or so universities in Asia and Europe.[23] During the global offline suspension caused by the epidemic, some course platforms recommended by the Chinese Ministry of Education (including Ali Ding and iCourse) were also recommended by UNESCO. For example, iCourse, one of the sharing platforms of higher education resources in China, vigorously promotes the sharing and dissemination of high-quality educational resources with the help of Internet technology, which is a vital tool to promote the reform and quality of higher education and teaching in China.[20] Video Open Class of Chinese University, Resource Sharing Class of Chinese University, and Chinese University MOOC are the results of this platform’s launching.

4. Suggestions and Prospects

As countries along the “Belt and Road”, China and Turkey have extensive cooperation in the field of international cooperation in higher education. In order to further enhance their higher education cooperation, this paper puts forward the following suggestions based on the above research.

4.1 Improve the Study Abroad System

The improvement of international exchange programs is an integral part of the in-depth international cooperation of higher education between the two countries. In addition to the existing long-term exchange programs, universities in the two countries can launch short-term visiting or online exchange programs, which are lower in cost, less difficult to apply, and shorter in the time span than studying abroad. Moreover, students who have long-term plans to study abroad can experience foreign education models and accumulate experience through short-term visits. Chinese colleges and universities can also reduce the pressure on domestic students to take the postgraduate and doctoral entrance examinations by setting up through train to study abroad for students in pursuit of master’s and doctoral degrees.

At the same time, improving the credit mutual recognition system is key to encouraging students to exchange abroad. Chinese universities can carry out fixed and long-term cooperative relations with Turkish universities. On the premise of fully understanding the teaching quality and management methods of other schools, the credits and GPA of students studying in other schools should be certified as that of students in this initial school, which can ensure the learning quality of international students and the recognition of credits abroad, so as to promote the enthusiasm of students from both countries for studying abroad.

4.2 Improve the Quality of Cultural Exchange Courses

Improving the curriculum quality and diversity of cultural exchanges is key to deepening cooperation between the two countries. Given the current curriculum internationalization in China, Chinese universities should not only focus on boosting the internationalization of disciplines with Chinese characteristics and speeding up the construction of curriculum internationalization of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics, but also emphasize the promotion of Chinese culture and spirit. As for less internationalized courses about philosophical thought and theory with Chinese characteristics, besides the basic theory teaching, we should also set up highly speculative and realistic topics that are in line with the international community, so as to enhance the sense of the times and pertinence of teaching, thus reducing the strangeness of related theories caused by cultural differences. In the form of teaching, we can help international students better experience and understand Chinese culture by guiding them to visit museums and perform role-plays, and increase their sense of participation in classroom learning, thus improving teaching quality.
4.3 Further Expand the Scope of Studying Abroad

When students choose their destinations for studying abroad, they often prefer nearby countries or countries with stronger strengths. Meanwhile, Chinese international students are mainly concentrated in economically developed areas in the East. Therefore, it is necessary to further guide students not to restrict their study areas to countries with developed economies and technology, but encourage them to go to Belt and Road countries to feel the local customs and culture for a deep understanding of the history, geography, politics, economy, etc. Besides, Lanzhou University, Xinjiang University, and other key universities in western China can be encouraged to actively respond to the Belt and Road Initiative. Taking the construction of core areas of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “Opening to the West” in China as an opportunity, we should attach importance to enhancing influence on countries along the Silk Road, continuously expand the breadth and depth of international exchanges and cooperation, and build a better international platform for higher education.

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