

MAPPING EVOLUTIONARY STAGES AND EXPLORING INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS IN SINO-UK COOPERATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATING SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Despite the significant expansion of Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS) over the last forty years, there remains a scarcity of research that connects its macro-level structural changes with the micro-level negotiation of institutional logics. To fill this gap, this study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design integrating Social Network Analysis (SNA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within the Institutional Logics Perspective (ILP). Quantitative and qualitative strands were conducted concurrently and independently before being integrated during interpretation. First, SNA was employed to map the collaborative network of Sino-UK institutions and programmes from 1995 to 2025. Four evolutionary phases were identified: exploratory (1995–2003), expansion (2004–2015), quality enhancement (2016–2020), and transformation (2021–2025). Second, Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), was selected as a representative case for in-depth analysis. Drawing on CDA and ILP, five English-language talent cultivation schemes were scrutinized to explore how institutional logics are discursively constructed and negotiated. The findings reveal that talent cultivation discourse selectively integrates state, academic, market, and international logics rather than privileging a single dominant logic, producing a hybrid graduate model that is simultaneously ideologically grounded, academically competent, and globally oriented. By linking macro-level network dynamics with micro-level discursive processes, this study provides an in-depth multi-tiered account of the evolution and formation of Sino-UK transnational higher education, while also proposing a flexible framework for investigating institutional changes across diverse transnational educational contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The past three decades have witnessed a rapid expansion in both the scope and scale of transnational higher education (TNHE) (Knight, 2016; Schueller et al., 2024). With the accelerating internationalization of higher education in China, Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS), a China's regulated form of TNHE, has developed at a remarkable pace (Chen et al., 2026; Mok & Han, 2016; Tan, 2009). In this study, CFCRS refers to the legally regulated provision of education in China through substantive collaboration between Chinese and foreign educational institutions, primarily serving Chinese students through cooperative institutions or programmes (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2003). Previous studies usually explore TNHE either from a policy or network perspective (Liu & Ling, 2025; Pan & Mu, 2025). The early policy documents mainly focused on institutional experiments and preliminary regulations. Subsequently, the policies shifted their emphasis to introducing foreign educational resources, standardization and quality assurance, paying more attention to supervision, evaluation, and improving education quality. Therefore, major policy changes provide significant grounds for exploring shifts in cooperative structures and evolutionary stages (Chen et al., 2026). While Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has seen extensive application in studies of higher education policy and

institutional web presence (Mulderriig, 2024; Southern, 2026), comparatively few scholars have examined curriculum and institutional documentation within CFCRS.

Despite the sustained growth, research on CFCRS continues to be fragmented. At the macro level, much of the existing literature focuses on policy analysis (Chen et al., 2026; Iftekhar & Kayombo, 2016; Zhang & Liao, 2021) and the general characteristics (Tao & Guo, 2025). At the micro level, most studies emphasise curriculum design (Wang et al., 2022), student identity (Cai et al., 2025) and intercultural perspectives (Zhang, 2025). While these studies make important contributions, they rarely connect the macro-level institutional evolution of the bilateral system with micro-level processes occurring inside specific institutions. Macro studies explain changes in policy environments and collaboration structures but pay little attention to how these changes are understood and implemented within institutions. Conversely, micro studies reveal the specific practices of institutions but overlook the broader structural context that shapes these practices.

Against this backdrop, the TNHE landscape has undergone profound transformation in China, with Sino-UK cooperative education emerging as one of its most prominent forms (Tao & Guo, 2025). The United Kingdom is one of the leading sources of foreign partners in CFCRS at the undergraduate level and beyond in China (Si & Rayner, 2025). Concurrently, few studies have considered Sino-UK cooperation as a social process highly dependent on discourse practices to study the internal logic and negotiation of its official text, such as talent cultivation schemes. As a result, linking the two is crucial for understanding how systemic changes translate into institutional discourse and educational practices.

To fill this gap, the present study develops a two-tier analytical framework that combines Social Network Analysis (SNA) and CDA within the Institutional Logics Perspective (ILP). SNA maps the progression of Sino-UK cooperative education from 1995 to 2025, highlighting its developmental phases, network configurations, and significant participants. Meanwhile, CDA investigates the negotiation of conflicting institutional logics within the talent cultivation schemes of a representative institution, aiming to shape educational objectives and graduate identities.

In this study, a talent cultivation scheme (人才培养方案, *réncai péiyǎng fāng'àn*) is defined as the officially issued programme-level document that delineates the educational objectives, curriculum, learning outcomes, teaching and assessment strategies, and degree requirements for a CFCRS programme. As a regulated form of TNHE, CFCRS functions within the framework of national policy priorities that have evolved in tandem with China's broader internationalisation agenda (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2003; Zhang & Liao, 2021). Consequently, it is regarded as both a curriculum document and a discursive platform where these priorities, along with the expectations of partner institutions, are expressed and legitimised.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study investigated how the talent cultivation discourse of a representative Sino-UK cooperative education institution has reflected shifting institutional logics and structural transformations from 1995 to 2025.

Specifically, it aimed to:

- (1) establish the structural context of Sino-UK cooperative education expansion;
- (2) analyse how competing institutional logics are discursively negotiated in talent cultivation schemes;
- (3) interpret how these discursive negotiations reflect tensions between state, market, academic and international logics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TNHE and Sino-UK Cooperative Education

In TNHE, educational models operate across diverse institutional and national contexts, requiring adaptation and negotiation rather than straightforward transfer (Schueller et al., 2024). Evidence from international educational reform further illustrates how global standards are recontextualized through local priorities, institutional capacities, and regulatory conditions (Kanoksilapatham, 2026). Sino-UK cooperation can therefore be understood as an institutionally embedded process in which transnational educational practices are selectively adapted and negotiated across competing institutional demands.

Since the 1990s, CFCRS has been a significant form and component of TNHE in China (Mok & Khai, 2024). In the field of CFCRS, the United Kingdom was the first country to conduct large-scale educational cooperation with China. Studies note that UK institutions have been particularly active in establishing cooperative programmes and institutions in China, owing to the compatibility between British degree structures and Chinese regulatory frameworks, as well as the UK's strong reputation in engineering, business, and applied sciences (Healey, 2015). Therefore, this research selects institutions and programmes of Sino-UK cooperative education at the undergraduate level and above to conduct in-depth analysis. Existing literature has offered valuable insights into these developments. Researchers have examined policy analysis (Iftekhar & Kayombo, 2016), curriculum design (Wang et al., 2022), and institutional governance (Si & Rayner, 2025). However, most of these studies focus on individual cases rather than the relationship structure of the entire cooperative network. As a result, limited attention has been paid to how Sino-UK cooperative institutions are positioned within broader networks of collaboration or how these networks evolve over time.

Evolutionary and Macro-Level Perspectives on TNHE and CFCRS

To address issues of scale and change, researchers have attempted to periodize the evolution of TNHE and CFCRS to map their historical paths. Knight (2016) describes TNHE as a fluid and increasingly intricate aspect of the internationalization of higher education, whereas de Wit and Altbach (2021) point out a transition from an expansion-focused model of internationalization to one that emphasizes quality and strategic considerations. These viewpoints highlight that cross-border cooperative education is not a fixed entity but rather adapts in response to evolving policy, institutional, and geopolitical contexts. Recent investigations into CFCRS further illustrate the importance of a macro-level, policy-sensitive framework: for instance, Chen et al. (2026) trace the policy-driven progression of CFCRS from 1978 to 2025, uncovering distinct developmental stages influenced by changes in China's regulatory and internationalization policies. At the macro level, network-based methodologies have also been utilized to analyze transnational collaborations, cooperative frameworks, and mobility patterns. Pan and Mu (2025) employ SNA to depict the development of Sino-Australian educational partnerships, while Liu and Ling (2025) utilize SNA to investigate the changing CFCRS network. Despite these advances, SNA remains underutilized in CFCRS research, particularly in examining how evolving institutional networks and policy shifts shape Sino-UK cooperation and the institutional discourses through which it is constructed and negotiated. This gap motivates the present study's integration of SNA and CDA to examine the structural and discursive dimensions of Sino-UK cooperation.

Theoretical Framework

The study is theoretically grounded in ILP (Thornton et al., 2012), which conceptualizes Sino-UK cooperative education as an institutional field shaped by the interaction of multiple and sometimes competing logics. It views social organisation as an inter-institutional system where differing logics coexist and shape how actors interpret their realities. Institutional logics act as “frames of reference” that direct actors' sensemaking, actions, and identities (Thornton et al., 2012). While internationalization was not originally recognised as a separate institutional order within the framework, scholars in higher education have increasingly acknowledged it as a significant factor influencing universities and TNHE (Cai & Mehari, 2015; Cai & Mountford, 2022). Consequently, this study identifies four competing institutional logics in Sino-UK cooperative education: state logic, which emphasises ideological and moral development; market logic, which focuses on competitiveness and employability; academic logic, which values knowledge production and disciplinary excellence; and international logic, which prioritises global standards, intercultural competence, and mobility. Previous research has shown how these logics influence governance and organisational practices in higher education, yet there has been limited exploration of how institutional logics are enacted and negotiated through discourse (Zheng et al., 2018).

Institutional logics are not simply abstract belief systems; they are manifested through language and textual practices (Reay & Jones, 2016). Therefore, official documents like talent cultivation schemes serve as crucial sites where competing logics are expressed and translated into educational practice. Institutional logics are not directly visible, instead, they show up through discourse and language choices. Especially, modality reflects how institutions set up obligations and authority, while agency shows which actors are seen as responsible for educational outcomes. Legitimation strategies show how practices justify themselves by referring to national development, international standards, or employability. Interdiscursivity further indicates that multiple logics coexist and are negotiated, including academic excellence, market

competitiveness, and national priorities. Overall, these language features reveal the institutional logics embedded in educational discourse.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: What structural patterns characterize the expansion of Sino-UK cooperative higher education institutions from 1995 to 2025?
- RQ2: How are competing state, market, and academic logics discursively negotiated in the talent cultivation schemes of a representative Sino-UK cooperative programme?
- RQ3: How does the talent cultivation discourse reflect tensions between competing state, market, academic and international logics?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design as outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2023). In the initial quantitative phase, SNA maps the structural evolution of Sino-UK cooperative education partnerships from 1995 to 2025, identifying evolutionary phases, network configurations, and notable examples. Building on these findings, the subsequent qualitative phase examines the institutional logics embedded in the talent cultivation schemes of a representative joint institution. Integrating the two strands allows the study to connect macro-level network evolution with micro-level discursive dynamics, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of how Sino-UK cooperative education has navigated competing logics and become institutionalized over time.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were sourced between November and December 2025 from the Information Monitoring Platform for CFCRS, operated by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (n.d.), filtering for active and Chinese Ministry of Education-approved Sino-UK cooperative education partnerships at the bachelor's level and above. To ensure completeness, supplementary keyword searches (e.g., "China", "Transnational Higher Education", "joint programme") were conducted on the websites of over 90 UK and 200 Chinese universities, following established international data collection strategies (Pan & Mu, 2026). The inclusion criteria required active undergraduate or postgraduate partnerships co-established in Mainland China by British and Chinese higher education providers. Officially terminated agreements, sub-degree programmes, and partnerships with non-UK institutions were excluded. Ultimately, the dataset comprised 202 active partnerships across three cooperation models, involving 143 Chinese and 90 British universities. Key metrics recorded included institutional names, programme titles, launch years, degree levels, locations, majors, and validity periods. These partnerships are all active at the time of data collection.

For the qualitative strand, Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), established in 2016 through a partnership between Northwestern Polytechnical University and Queen Mary University of London, was purposively selected based on five criteria: its representativeness of Sino-UK partnership models, stable organisational structure, sufficient institutional longevity to capture discursive change over a ten-year period, disciplinary focus on Materials Science and Engineering, and high accessibility of relevant documentation. Its undergraduate programmes provide talent cultivation schemes in both Chinese and English for the 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2024 cohorts, while only a Chinese-language scheme was available for 2025 at the time of data collection, which concluded on August 18, 2026. The five available English-language schemes were therefore retrieved from the official website (Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), 2017; 2018; 2019; 2022; 2024) and constituted the primary qualitative corpus. This corpus was selected because the study's focus on English-medium discourse through which the Sino-UK programmes articulate curricular purposes, structures, and graduate attributes. To maintain semantic consistency, each English document was meticulously compared with its Chinese equivalent, with a particular focus on sections that outline educational objectives, graduation criteria, curriculum frameworks, and national development priorities.

Ethical Considerations

This study analysed publicly available and institutionally issued curriculum documents and involved no human participants, personal data, interviews, or interventions; formal ethical approval was therefore not required.

Data Analysis

This study adopts a two-tier analytical framework integrating SNA and CDA. While quantitatively SNA maps the structural evolution of the collaborative network, CDA qualitatively examines how these institutional logics are discursively constructed, negotiated, and legitimised in talent cultivation schemes.

To map the structural changes in Sino-UK cooperative education, the study employs SNA to examine the structural characteristics of collaboration networks among participating institutions. SNA provides a structural perspective on institutional cooperation by measuring relational nodes such as network density, degree centrality, and average degree, (David, 2001). SNA was conducted using UCINET 6.661, while NetDraw was employed for visualization purposes. The network was constructed by considering individual Chinese and UK universities as nodes, with their active partnerships represented as edges. In accordance with the classifications set by Chinese Ministry of Education, each joint institution was documented as a single partnership, whereas each independent programme was counted as a separate tie. Importantly, carrying forward existing active partnerships into later periods, a cumulative network approach was adopted to effectively capture long-term development across stages defined by significant policy milestones. The analysis focused on both the comprehensive network structure and the placement of individual participants using four essential metrics: network size, assessed by the total count of nodes and edges to monitor overall scale; network density, which evaluates the extent of interconnectedness among universities; average degree, representing the usual number of connections per institution and illustrating levels of engagement; and centrality, especially degree centrality, which aids in uncovering how influence is allocated and highlights the most significant players within the network. To provide context for these structural metrics, the study supplemented the SNA with descriptive analyses of regional distribution, disciplinary composition, and educational levels, thereby offering a thorough perspective on development trends over time.

CDA provides a framework for examining how discourse, power, and ideology interact with institutional and social practices (Fairclough, 2010). Rather than treating discourse as merely a vehicle for communication, CDA conceptualizes it as a form of social practice that both shapes and is shaped by broader social structures. This orientation proves particularly productive for scrutinizing institutional language, given its capacity to link micro-level textual features to macro-level social formations and power dynamics (Fairclough, 1993). Fairclough's (2003) tripartite model approaches discourse on three interconnected planes: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The analysis was conducted in an iterative manner across three distinct stages: (1) identification of textual evidence, (2) coding of linguistic features into institutional logics, and (3) interpretation of findings through the lens of the ILP. At the textual level, the analysis scrutinized lexical selections, modality, agency, nominalization, and syntactic structure to uncover the construction of institutional meanings. At the level of discursive practice, it examined interdiscursivity, generic hybridity, and the negotiation of institutional logics within the processes of discourse production and circulation. At the social practice level, the analysis explored how discourse served to legitimize educational priorities, reproduce power dynamics, and reflect wider institutional and ideological contexts.

As shown in Table 1, the analysis focused on five linguistic features (modality, agency, nominalization, lexical choices, and interdiscursivity) to reveal power asymmetry, ideological presuppositions, and legitimization strategies within the discursive and social practice dimensions of framework.

Table 1: Key linguistic features analysed

Linguistic Feature	Focus	Analytical Question
Modality	How authority and obligation are expressed	What modal verbs (must, should, can, will) are used or absent?
Agency	Who acts and who is acted upon	Who is positioned as active subject vs. passive recipient?
Nominalization	What processes and agency are obscured	What actions are turned into abstract nouns (-tion, -ment, -ence)?
Lexical Choices	What values and ideologies are embedded	What are the connotations and ideological associations of key words?
Interdiscursivity	How multiple discourses are blended	What discourses (state, market, academic, and international) are combined?

To show how the analytical framework was applied, an Exemplar was presented with a chosen excerpt from 2019 Materials Science and Engineering document to serve as an exemplar.

Exemplar

Educational Aims

Under the guidance of Marxism, this programme aims to enhance morality and foster talents, to develop qualified and innovative talents who can study and work transnationally with the knowledge of natural science, materials science and engineering, and social science. Students graduate with comprehensive qualities, high professional competencies, a global horizon, a life-long study ability, and the recognition of international rules. Students who have completed their studies will be able to pursue higher degrees and research within universities in China and internationally or careers in the expanding materials science and manufacturing industry in world famous enterprises. (Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), 2019)

Note: Red means state logic. Green means market logic. Blue means academic logic. Purple means international logic.

Table 2 shows the indicative discursive features and linguistic evidence associated with each type of institutional logic. Given that internationalization has become an increasingly autonomous organising principle in transnational higher education (Cai & Mountford, 2022), International Logic was incorporated into the coding scheme to capture discourses related to global norms, international standards, and transnational mobility that extend beyond the explanatory scope of state, market, and academic logics.

Table 2: Institutional logics coding scheme

Institutional Logic	Dominant Discourse	Linguistic Evidence	Institutional Tension	Discursive Legitimation
State Logic	Ideological cultivation and moral education	“Under the guidance of Marxism”; “enhance morality and foster talents”	Academic autonomy and transnational educational norms	Ideological presupposition: Marxism guidance and moral education are presented as self-evident and non-negotiable foundations of talent cultivation.
Market Logic	Innovation, employability, and global competitiveness	“Qualified and innovative talents”; “world famous enterprises”	Educational purposes beyond economic utility	Instrumental rationality: The value of higher education is legitimised through employability, productivity, and international competitiveness.
Academic Logic	Knowledge production and scholarly development	“Knowledge of natural science, materials science and engineering, and social science”; “higher degrees and research”	Political and economic instrumentalization of higher education	Expert authority: Disciplinary knowledge, research capacity, and lifelong learning are constructed as objective markers of educational quality and academic excellence.
International Logic	Global engagement and transnational mobility	“Study and work transnationally”; “global horizon”; “recognition of international rules”; “internationally”	National priorities and ideological sovereignty	Normative naturalization: International standards and global mobility are normalized as desirable attributes of graduates and indicators of educational quality.

The passage does not favor a single institutional logic; instead, it constructs a hybrid talent cultivation model by selectively incorporating state, market, academic, and international logics. Phrases like “*Under the guidance of Marxism*,” “*qualified and innovative talents*,” and “*global horizon*” portray the ideal graduate as being ideologically grounded, academically proficient, and globally aware. From a CDA standpoint, these discursive selections serve as legitimizing strategies, normalizing the coexistence of various educational objectives and balancing conflicting priorities related to national development, academic excellence, market competitiveness, and internationalization. The resulting hybrid graduate identity exemplifies the institutional complexity of Sino-UK cooperative education and demonstrates how discourse mediates and legitimizes competing institutional logics.

Trustworthiness

The assurance of trustworthiness was achieved through methodical analytical processes. SNA utilized an extensive dataset encompassing Sino-UK collaborative institutions and programmes from 1995 to 2025. CDA followed a predefined framework informed by Fairclough's three-dimensional model and ILP that transitioned from textual evidence to institutional logics, and theoretical interpretations. The combination of SNA and CDA enhanced the reliability of the results.

RESULTS

The Evolution of Sino-UK Cooperative Partnerships Network

This section presents the results from the SNA of Sino-UK cooperative institutions and programmes from 1995 to 2025. Based on the temporal framework, the analysis explores the evolution of the cooperative network across four stages. For each stage, the analysis part integrates visual social network (Figures 1–4) with quantitative indicators (Table 3–10) to provide a comprehensive picture of network patterns, regional distribution, educational levels and disciplinary composition.

Table 3: Overall network characteristics of Sino-UK cooperative education by stage

Stage	Period	Nodes	Total Edges	Network Centrality	Network Density	Average Degree
1	1995–2003	14	10	2.367%	0.102	1.429
2	2004–2015	137	196	1.160%	0.013	1.737
3	2016–2020	199	284	0.803%	0.008	1.668
4	2021–2025	231	340	0.543%	0.007	1.784

Table 4: Regional distribution of Sino-UK cooperative education by stage

Area	Stage 1 (1995–2003)	Stage 2 (2004–2015)	Stage 3 (2016–2020)	Stage 4 (2021–2025)
East China	4 (40%)	50 (42.02%)	62 (37.35%)	75 (36.41%)
North China	4 (40%)	19 (15.97%)	23 (13.86%)	25 (12.14%)
Central China	1 (10%)	23 (19.33%)	30 (18.07%)	32 (15.53%)
South China	1 (10%)	5 (4.20%)	6 (3.61%)	17 (8.25%)
Northeast China	0 (0%)	10 (8.40%)	20 (12.05%)	24 (11.65%)
Northwest China	0 (0%)	2 (1.68%)	6 (3.61%)	10 (4.85%)
Southwest China	0 (0%)	10 (8.40%)	19 (11.45%)	23 (11.17%)
Total	10	119	166	206

Table 5: Distribution of educational levels in Sino-UK cooperative education by stage

Educational Level	Stage 1 (1995–2003)	Stage 2 (2004–2015)	Stage 3 (2016–2020)	Stage 4 (2021–2025)
Bachelor's Degree	8 (80%)	105 (82.68%)	149 (82.32%)	185 (80.79%)
Master's Degree	2 (20%)	18 (14.17%)	25 (13.81%)	33 (14.41%)
Doctoral Degree	0 (0%)	4 (3.15%)	7 (3.87%)	11 (4.80%)
Total	10	127	181	229

Table 6: Disciplinary distribution of Sino-UK cooperative education by stage

Discipline	Stage 1 (1995–2003)	Stage 2 (2004–2015)	Stage 3 (2016–2020)	Stage 4 (2021–2025)
Social Science and Management	6 (60%)	62 (37.58%)	78 (30.95%)	88 (25.66%)
Engineering and Technology	2 (20%)	63 (38.18%)	111 (44.05%)	159 (46.36%)
Life Science and Medicine	2 (20%)	19 (11.52%)	34 (13.49%)	53 (15.45%)
Arts and Humanities	0 (0%)	21 (12.73%)	29 (11.51%)	43 (12.54%)
Total	10	165	252	343

Stage one (1995–2003): Fragmented and Low-Density Networks

The period from 1995 to 2003 represents an exploratory stage of Sino-UK cooperative education. The 1995 “Interim Provisions” focused on the importance of “introducing high-quality foreign educational resources,” and this policy document made CFCRS mainly seen as a mechanism for bringing in and experimenting educational resources. Figure 1 shows the network structure of this stage, while Table 7 lists the degree centrality of the main participating institutions.

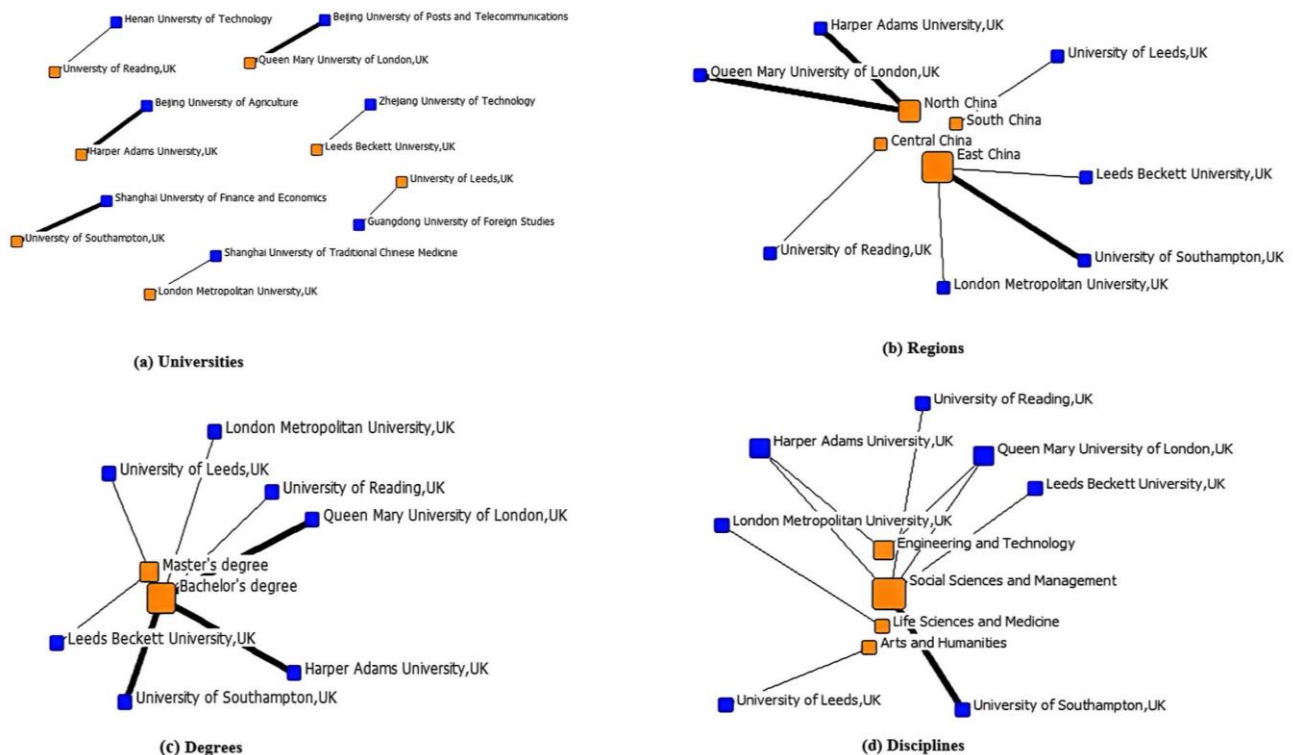


Figure 1: Network map of Sino-UK cooperation (1995–2003)

As shown in Table 3, the network at the first stage was small and fragmented. 14 universities participated at this stage, forming 10 cooperative ties, reflecting the experimental nature of Sino-UK cooperation. The network density at this stage was 0.102, the highest among the four stages. However, in a network with only 14 nodes and 10 links, a higher density does not necessarily mean high connectivity; the average degree was 1.429, indicating that most cooperations were just simple arrangements between one Chinese university and one UK university.

Table 7: Top institutions by degree centrality at stage one

Rank	Institutions	Country	Degree
1	Shanghai University of Finance and Economics	China	2
2	University of Southampton	UK	2
3	Harper Adams University	UK	2
4	Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications	China	2
5	Queen Mary University of London	UK	2
6	Beijing University of Agriculture	China	2
7	University of Leeds	UK	1
8	Henan University of Technology	China	1
9	University of Reading	UK	1
10	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies	China	1

Degree centrality analysis also shows some universities, like Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, University of Southampton, are relatively central in the network. However, their centrality scores are similar, which means no university has outstanding influence at this stage.

Figure 1 (a) visualizes the cooperative network at this stage. Most partnerships consisted of one-to-one link rather than dense collaborative clusters and integrated network. In regional distribution, early cooperative networks exhibited obvious regional imbalances and were geographically scattered. At the education level, undergraduate cooperation accounted for the majority, and no PhD programmes and institutions were established, which shows that early cooperation was mainly focused on talent cultivation rather than academic research. From the perspective of discipline, the number of cooperative relations was limited, making it impossible to form clear disciplinary clusters. The network showed an emerging but still fragmented disciplinary structure.

Overall, this stage reflects an experimental and exploratory phase, in which Sino-UK cooperative education was initiated by individual universities rather than systemic coordination. The collaboration patterns remained highly fragmented. Its academic legitimacy at this stage is mainly established by introducing foreign education models, rather than through localized practices.

Stage Two (2004–2015): Rapid Growth and Development

The second stage witnessed significant growth and development following the establishment and implementation of the 2003 Regulations of CFCRS. The “2004 Implementation Measures” encouraged greatly expanding openness and carrying out cooperation in “emerging and urgently needed academic fields,” while emphasising education quality. Figure 2 shows the network structure of this stage, while Table 8 lists the degree centrality of the main participating institutions.

The number of nodes increased more than ten times, while edges increased from 10 to 196. This upward trend indicates that Sino-UK cooperative education was no longer limited to a few pioneering schools. This widespread participation reflects the growing demand for internationalization in China’s higher education system. Even though the overall coverage of this cooperation network has expanded significantly, its network density has dropped from 0.102 to 0.013. This suggests that the growth in the number of institutions outweighed the actual progress in substantial cooperative relations. With more universities entering, the network has not become tighter, rather, it is becoming more dispersed. Network centrality also showed a similar trend, decreasing from 2.367% to 1.160%. This decline further proves a lack of dominant, influential core players leading the network.

Table 8: Top institutions by degree centrality at stage two

Rank	Institutions	Country	Degree
1	University of Shanghai for Science and Technology	China	8
2	Anglia Ruskin University	UK	6
3	University of Greenwich	UK	6
4	Teesside University	UK	5
5	Glasgow Caledonian University	UK	5
6	University of Reading	UK	5
7	University of Jinan	China	4
8	University of Bolton	UK	4
9	Bangor University	UK	4
10	Suzhou University of Science and Technology	China	4

Shanghai University of Science and Technology occupied the most central position in the network, followed by Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Greenwich, and the University of Jinan. Compared with other participants, these institutions had more partnerships and played an important role in the second phase, becoming relatively hubs. However, the differences among these core universities were still relatively limited. No single university held a dominant position, which aligns with the trend of decreasing network centrality at this phase.

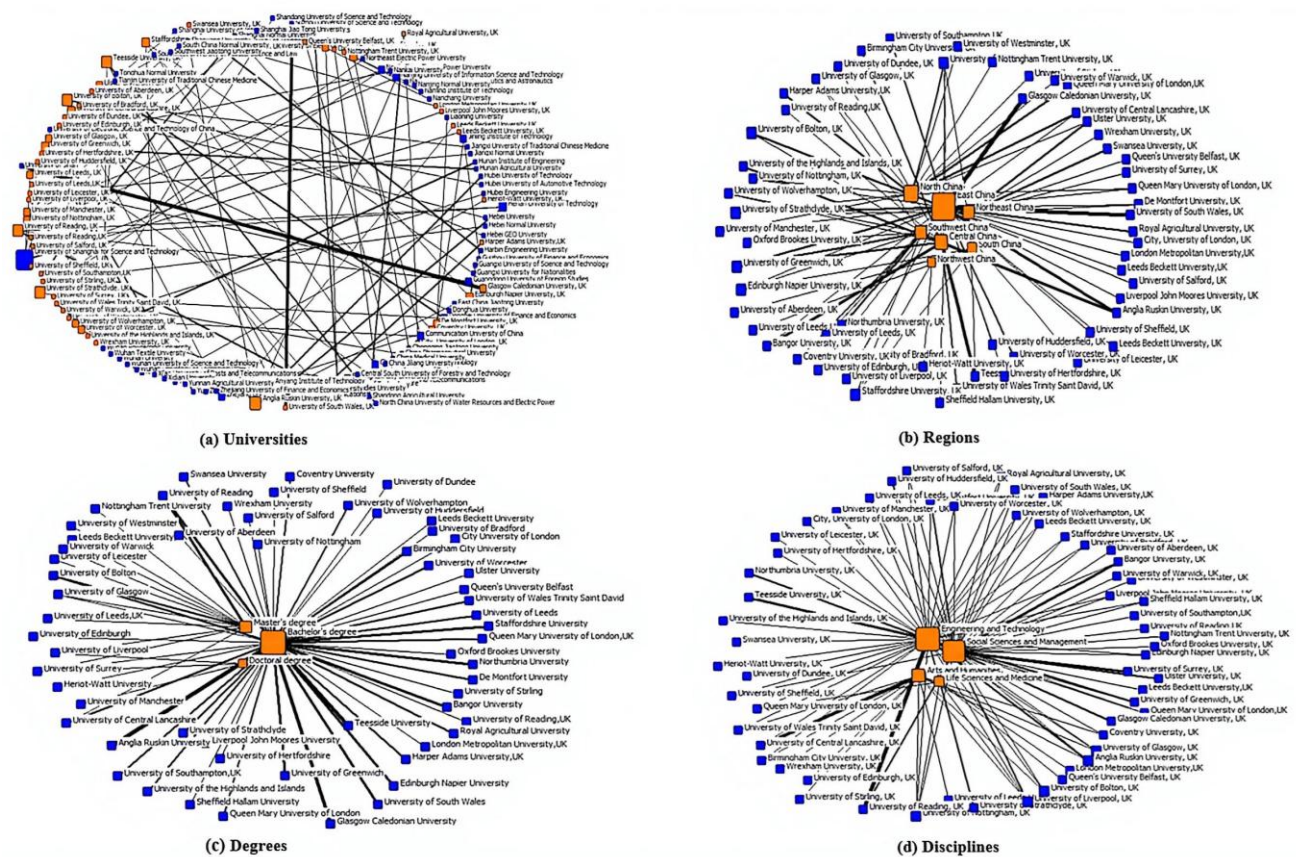


Figure 2: Network map of Sino-UK cooperation (2004–2015)

Figure 2 (a) shows that this network becomes denser and more complex. Table 3 shows that the connections of cooperation spread to other areas, indicating a significant shift from localized experimentation to broader national connection. In terms of educational level, doctoral-level cooperation emerged for the first time. Although the doctoral programmes and institutions were on a limited scale, their appearance signaled the beginning of research-oriented Sino-UK cooperation. Moreover, the prominent role of engineering reflects China's need for internationally trained technical experts, while the growth of management-related subjects aligns with the development of economic globalization and market reforms. Engineering and Technology, as well as Social Sciences and Management formed the central hubs in the network.

Taken together, 2004–2015 was a period of large-scale expansion. The number of partnerships grew rapidly, network centrality dropped, and coverage across regions, disciplines and educational levels kept increasing, indicating that Sino-UK cooperation was evolving from a small experimental network at the first stage to a wide and diverse field. The rapid expansion of the network shows the increasingly institutionalized Sino-UK cooperative education.

Stage Three (2016–2020): Structural Optimization and Quality Enhancement

The third stage marked a significant turning point. This stage began with Chinese Ministry of Education’s intensified focus on quality assurance, and the launch of the “Double First-Class” initiative, which explicitly linked international collaboration to institutional excellence. Figure 3 shows the network structure of this stage, while Table 9 lists the degree centrality of the main participating institutions.

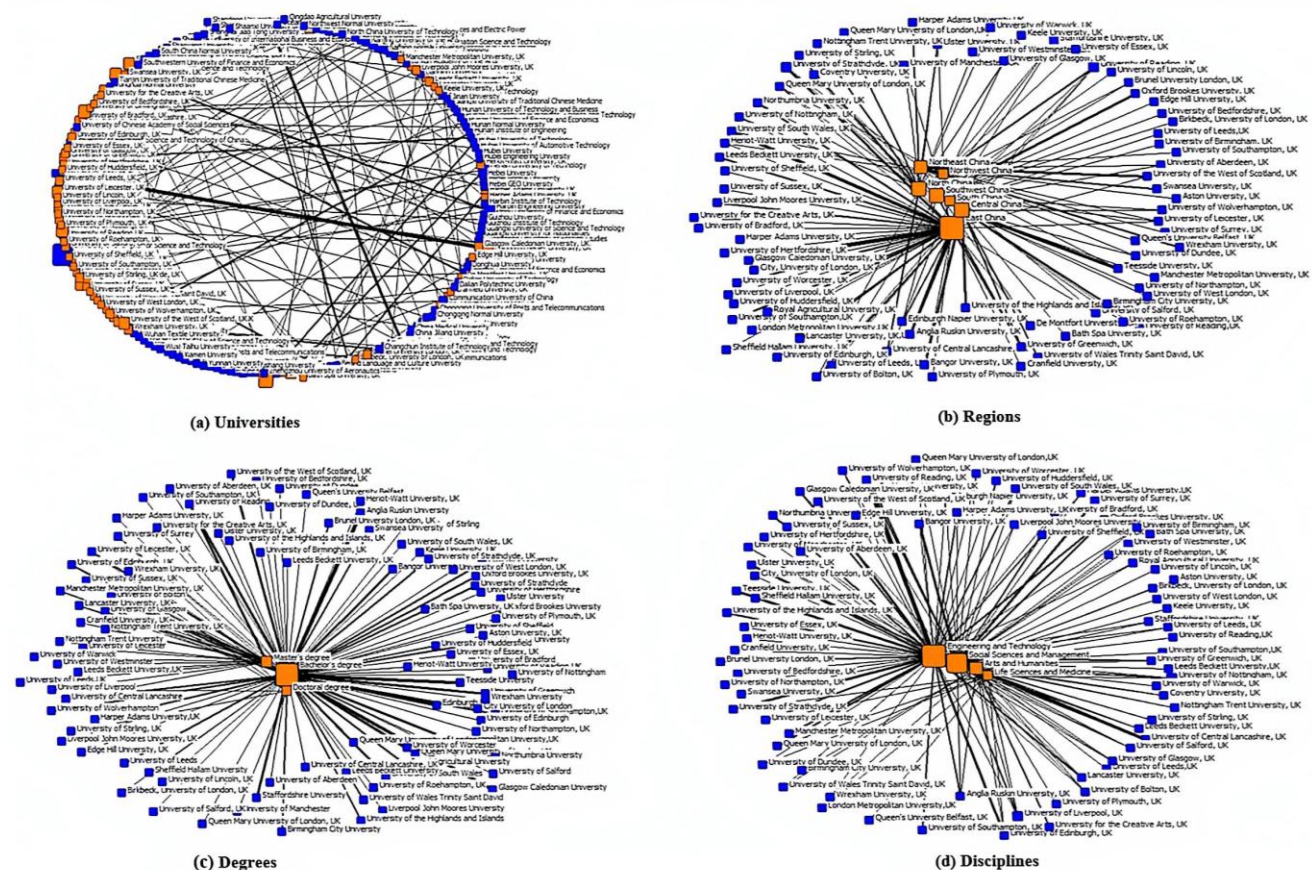


Figure 3: Network map of Sino-UK cooperation (2016–2020)

The number of participating institutions and the number of cooperative ties both increased, which shows that Sino-UK cooperation kept its momentum and continued to attract new actors. However, compared to the second stage, this expansion was more moderate. At this stage, the network density dropped from 0.013 to 0.008, which suggests that the network was still expanding faster than cooperation is forming. This network characteristic shows that continuous expansion did not necessarily lead to closer ties among participants. At the same time, network centrality showed a similar trend, decreasing from 1.160% to 0.803%. Moreover, the average degree also slightly declined, from 1.737 to 1.668. This small decrease shows that network growth was driven by new participants joining, rather than stronger relation among existing actors.

Table 9: Top institutions by degree centrality at stage three

Rank	Institutions	Country	Degree
1	University of Shanghai for Science and Technology	China	8
2	Anglia Ruskin University	UK	6
3	University of Greenwich	UK	6
4	University of Strathclyde	UK	6
5	Glasgow Caledonian University	UK	5
6	University of Reading	UK	5
7	Teesside University	UK	5
8	Henan University of Technology	China	4
9	University of the West of Scotland	UK	4
10	Harbin Engineering University	China	4

At this stage, Shanghai University of Science and Technology still maintained the most extensive connections. At the same time, some institutions that appeared at the first stage continued to act as core actors, indicating a certain continuity in the network structure. However, combined with the downward trend in network centrality data, this suggests that still no single university dominated the network at this stage. This decentralized structure reflects that Sino-UK cooperation was becoming more institutionalized, with resources not concentrated in a few hands but shared among multiple participants.

Although East China was still a relatively dense cooperative area, the regional distribution became more balanced compared to earlier stages, illustrating the policy development to promote more equitable cooperation across regions. At the degree level, master's and doctoral connections became more integrated into the network, showing a more significant shift to higher-level academic cooperation. In disciplinary composition, the continued prominence of engineering reflects China's strategic focus on technological innovation and industry upgrades. At the same time, the diversity in subject offerings also shows that the educational needs in Sino-UK cooperation fields were becoming increasingly complex. Overall, this stage can be considered as a phase of quality-oriented development. At this stage, the emphasis of cooperation shifted from expanding to improving their quality, structure, and academic cooperation depth.

Stage Four (2021–2025): Transformation and Stabilization

This period can be seen as a transitional phase for Sino-UK cooperative education. At this stage, the TNHE environment has undergone profound changes, including geopolitical shifts, the impact of COVID-19, digital transformation, and China's increasing emphasis on high-quality education development (Lim et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, Sino-UK cooperative education has entered a new stage characterized by transformation. Figure 4 shows the network structure of this stage, while Table 10 lists the degree centrality of the main participating institutions.

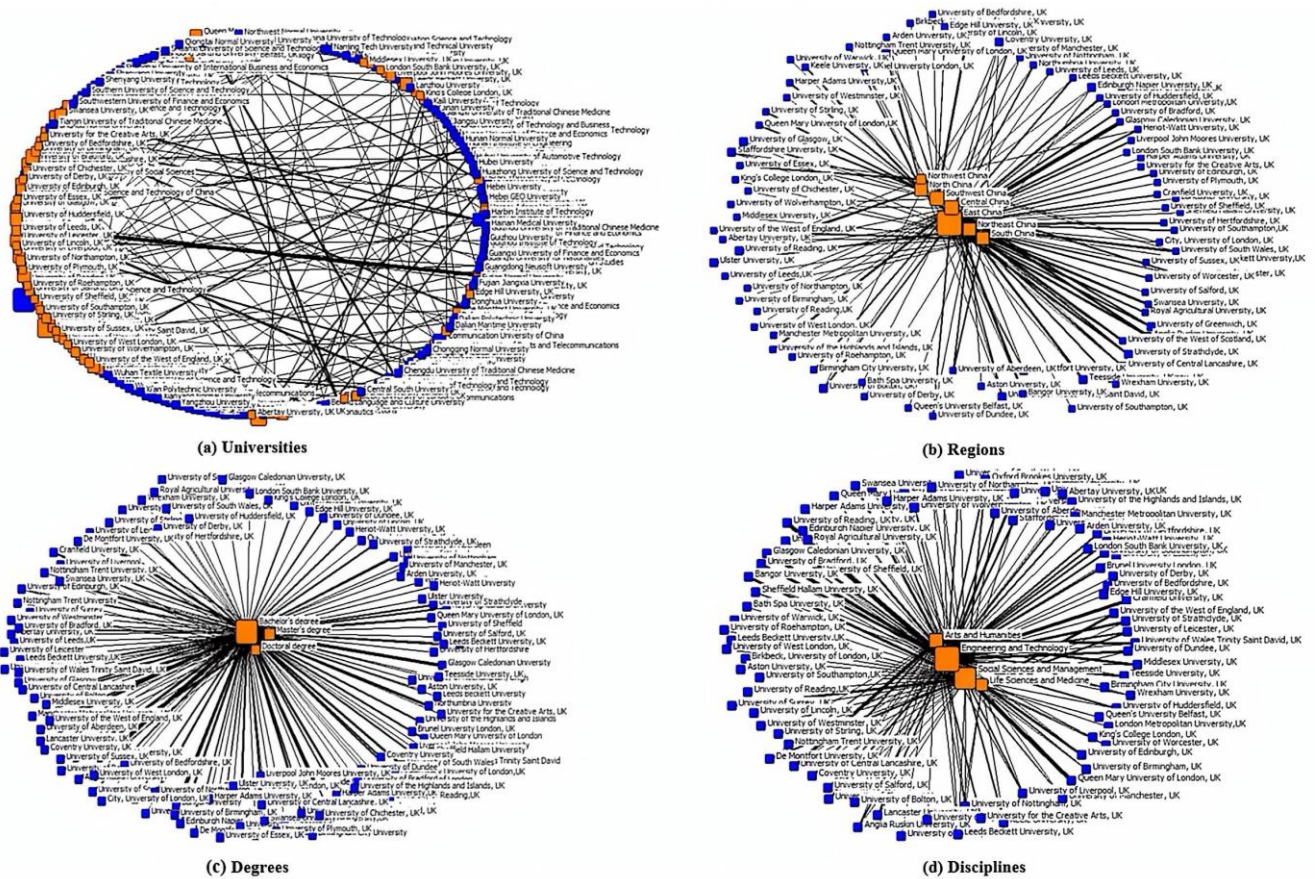


Figure 4: Network map of Sino-UK cooperation (2021–2025)

Table 10: Top institutions by degree centrality at stage four

Rank	Institutions	Country	Degree
1	University of Shanghai for Science and Technology	China	8
2	University of Greenwich	UK	6
3	Teesside University	UK	6
4	Anglia Ruskin University	UK	6
5	University of Strathclyde	UK	6
6	Glasgow Caledonian University	UK	5
7	University of South Wales	UK	5
8	Queen Mary University of London	UK	5
9	Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications	China	5
10	University of Reading	UK	5

Although the growth pace of participants and cooperative ties had slowed compared to earlier periods, the continuous increase in nodes and edges indicates that Sino-UK cooperative education had remained resilient facing external uncertainties. Network density decreased, suggesting that the cooperation was developing into a larger but looser network. This pattern reflects the field's gradual maturation from the first to the fourth stage, with expansion relying more on diversity rather than strengthening links between existing participants. Network centrality also followed a similar trend, showing that the structure was becoming more dispersed, with cooperation opportunities and resources extending to a wider range of institutions. Overall, these network data reveal a mature and increasingly diverse collaboration network, which can adapt to the ever-changing domestic and global environment. Similar to the previous stages, even though there were these key players, no single institution dominates the network completely. A stable core system coexisting with diverse new participants is a notable feature of this transitional phase.

The transformation stage showed increasing diversification across regions, disciplines, and educational levels. Sino-UK cooperative education was becoming more geographically spread out. For disciplines, engineering still dominated,

reflecting China's continued focus on technological innovation and high-level talent development, while the gradual expansion of media, communication, and interdisciplinary programmes illustrated new educational demands driven by social and industrial transformation. At the education level, the steady growth of master's and doctoral partnerships showed that academic cooperation is gradually deepening to higher-level research and graduate training.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the fourth stage is not just about simple growth in number, but a comprehensive process of diversification and decentralization. As a result, the Sino-UK cooperation field has evolved into a bigger but more flexible network that can adapt to the ever-changing domestic and global environments. Institutions are increasingly expected to develop unique educational models while responding to national strategies, labor market needs, and global academic standards.

Overall, the SNA results show that Sino-UK cooperative education has evolved from a small, scattered network into a larger, richer, more diverse, and increasingly institutionalized field. Early cooperation relied heavily on foreign resources and external standards, while later development involved more negotiation between government regulation, market demand, international standards, and academic quality. These findings lay the groundwork for the subsequent CDA analysis, which will look at how this structural shift is reflected and negotiated through institutional discourse in talent cultivation schemes.

The Evolution of Institutional Logics at Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES)

Establishing a Hybrid Foundation: Institutional Logics in the 2017 Talent Cultivation Scheme

Excerpt 1

Educational Aims

Under the guidance of Marxism, this programme **aims to enhance morality** and foster talents, to develop qualified and innovative talents who can study and work transnationally with the knowledge of natural science, materials science and engineering, and social science. Students graduate with comprehensive qualities, high professional competencies, a **global horizon**, a life-long study ability, and the **recognition of international rules**. Students who have completed their studies **are able to** pursue higher degrees and research within universities in China and internationally or careers in the expanding materials science and manufacturing industry in world famous enterprises. (Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), 2017)

From a modality perspective, this excerpt mainly uses low-commitment expressions like “aims to” and “are able to”, presenting educational goals as aspirations and possibilities rather than obligations. The agency mainly belongs to the programme itself, not the students, positioning the institution as the active agent while students are shaped as passive recipients of the system. This assignment of agency makes institutional authority natural and frames educational success as a result of programme and cultivation scheme design. Moreover, nominalized expressions like “morality” and the recognition of international rules” blur the actor, making these educational outcomes appear objective and universally desirable.

The phrase “under the guidance of Marxism” legitimizes educational objectives through ideological authority, and “enhancing morality” also reflects the state logic. Moreover, phrases like “qualified and innovative talent” position students as human capital with economic value. The adjective “innovative” further reflects the influence of market logic. Mentioning “the knowledge of natural science, materials science and engineering, and social science” highlights expertise in specific fields, while “pursue higher degrees and research” views academic development as an ideal educational outcome. These expressions reinforce academic logic. In addition, terms like “global horizon” and “the recognition of international rules” shape graduates into talents with international skills and cross-cultural abilities. These expressions typically reflect the international logic, where educational value is increasingly linked to global participation and international standards.

In this excerpt, nationalism, marketization, internationalization, and academic autonomy are no longer seen as opposing forces, but as complementary and mutually reinforcing goals, which means the programme tries to meet the needs of multiple audiences at the same time. This excerpt also reveals significant power relations. National ideology is presented as the taken-for-granted foundation of educational activities, instead of something that needs to be argued. This kind of discourse construction also aligns closely with the macro-level phase identified by SNA. During this period, Sino-UK cooperative education developed consistently under continuous national regulation, with increasing international participation and a growing market orientation.

Consolidating International and Market Orientations in the 2018 Talent Cultivation Scheme

Excerpt 2

Be equipped with international competitiveness

Students become highly proficient in English language: reading English materials and books in materials science, writing academic essays in English, and conducting technical presentations in English. The programme develops students' global horizon and the recognition of international rules via the British teaching mode and overseas internship programme. Students can obtain, use and manage various information to conduct cross-cultural communication and cooperation with innovative abilities and international competitiveness. Students can recognize Chinese characteristics and international comparisons correctly, as well as comprehend modern China and the world objectively and comprehensively.

Be equipped with the ability of life-long study

Students should stick to Marxist theory, promote and practice Socialist Core Values, recognize the responsibility of times and mission of history, and to understand ambition and dedication correctly. Students should have a strong sense of social responsibility, a healthy mental and moral state, the ability of leading and working in teams, and outstanding communicative and practical skills. Equipped with good presentation skills and writing abilities, students can communicate effectively with their peers and the public about complex engineering and scientific problems. The cultivation of consciousness of engineering ethics, and the concept of working for the wellbeing of the human beings and sustainable development can help students to adapt to dynamic changes and master the cutting-edge knowledge and new trends in the field of materials science so as to constantly improve students' abilities. (Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), 2018)

This excerpt from 2018 shifts the topic from grand educational goals to actual implementation. In terms of modality, it mixes possibility “students can...” with obligation “students should...”, presenting professional skills as achievable while framing ideological commitments as normative expectations. The focus of agency also moves from institutions to students. The programme is first positioned as responsible for producing internationally competitive graduates, and then students are given a role to actively engage in their future learning and career practice. However, this agency is still constrained by institutions, since the values and skills expected are all pre-set by the institution. Frequent nominalized expressions like international competitiveness, social responsibility, and engineering ethics further make these institutional priorities seem natural, while also hiding how they came about.

The lexical choices and interdiscursivity reveal the coexistence of multiple institutional logics. Mentions of “the British teaching model”, “overseas internship programmes” and “cross-cultural communication” highlight the discourse and logic on internationalization and global engagement. At the same time, expressions of “Marxist theory”, “Socialist Core Values” and “Chinese characteristics” clearly refer to national ideological logic and moral cultivation. Academic logic shows up in the emphasis on “good presentation skills and writing abilities”, “engineering ethics”, and “cutting-edge knowledge”, while market-oriented logic comes through terms like “innovation capability”, “practical skills”, and “transferable communication skills”. These words suggest that educational goals are influenced simultaneously by ideology, academics, internationalization, and economic factors. It reflects a more deliberate process of institutional mixing, where competing institutional expectations are reconciled through discourse.

In social practices, the logic of state, academia, market, and international factors are not just coexisting, they are merging into a unified model for talent cultivation. International abilities are no longer simply seen as an independent educational goal but are clearly framed within the country's ideology. At the same time, ideological education is justified through

concepts like global engagement, innovation, and sustainable development. This hybrid form reflects the increasingly complex institutional environment of Sino-UK cooperative education, where universities must meet national regulatory requirements, maintain international legitimacy, and respond to market demands. Consistent with macro-level network, at this stage, institutional expansion comes with stronger policy guidance and increasingly refined integration of multiple institutional priorities.

Discursive Stability in the 2019 Talent Cultivation Scheme

Comparing the talent cultivation schemes from 2018 and 2019, there are no substantive revisions in the programme educational aims and graduate requirements. The structures of the language setup are almost the same, including the emphasis on Marxist theory and socialist core values, international competence, engineering ethics, and lifelong learning. This discursive continuity suggests that the hybrid configuration of institutional logics had become stabilized and institutionalized within the programme. The lack of substantial revisions means that the existing discourse has successfully accommodated various institutional logics and continues to be used as a legitimate framework for talent cultivation, this stability also corresponds to the macro network identified in SNA, where the Sino-UK cooperative education system has entered a consolidation period characterized by relatively stable organisational relationships and policy directions.

Reframing Engineering Education through Ideological Integration in the 2021 Talent Cultivation Scheme

Excerpt 3

Ideological education

Implement the fundamental task of establishing virtues and educating people, use the thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era to shape the soul and educate people, and **strive to cultivate** students' spirit of patriotism. By making full use of the wide application and strong practical characteristics of materials science and engineering, bridge the course knowledge to national major projects and personage deed through in-class and extracurricular diversified teaching methods, as well as new media carriers to strengthen the guidance of value and foster the ideological and political education through the whole process of teaching. **It is necessary to not only make the teaching vivid, but also to make the process of ideological and political moral education concrete so as to convince people with reasonable facts.** Guide students to establish socialist core values and patriotism while teaching them solid professional knowledge in order to improve students' ideological and moral sentiments and enhance their sense of social responsibility and mission to serve the country and the people. (Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), 2022)

The 2021 talent cultivation scheme shows a significant shift in discourse, adding a dedicated section on ideological education. This document positions ideological education as an overarching teaching principle through the whole educational process.

Expressions like “use the thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics”, “Guide students to establish socialist core values” and “it is necessary,” are all institutional directives that frame ideological education as a duty to be fulfilled rather than an optional educational goal. Through imperative structures like “implement,” and “bridge,” the agency are also redefined, highlighting institutional authority while weakening students' initiative. Nominalization phrases like “patriotism” and “social responsibility” present ideological values as objective educational outcomes, masking how these values are constructed or debated. At the same time, expressions like “convince people with reasonable facts” frame ideological education as a rational, evidence-based practice rather than political indoctrination, thereby supporting its legitimacy.

At the level of discourse practice, this passage shows a strengthened interdiscursivity by strategically integrating political, moral, and academic discourse. A large amount of political discourse reflects an emphasis on state logic. Engineering education is no longer built around academic knowledge or professional skills but is linked to “national major projects” and “ideological and political education”. At the same time, academic logic is still reflected through references to materials science and engineering, course knowledge, and diverse teaching methods. The discourse integrates ideological and political education, subject learning, and professional practice into a unified educational path. This way of coordinating presents academic independence and political guidance as complementary rather than competing institutional logics.

From the perspective of social practice, this discussion reflects a major restructuring of institutional logics. Although academic logic continues to legitimize disciplinary and professional knowledge, it is increasingly subordinate to state logic, which has become the core principle guiding curriculum goals, teaching practices, and the construction of graduate identities. Engineering education is rhetorically redefined as a tool for cultivating politically reliable citizens who can contribute to national development, rather than just producing graduates who are technically competent. This integration aligns with the macro-level findings from SNA research. Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to develop distinctive educational models that respond to national strategies, labor market needs, and global academic standards.

Strategic Hybridization of Institutional Logics in the 2024 Talent Cultivation Scheme

Excerpt 4

Aims of the Programme

Focused on the international academic forefront of materials science, committed to the progress of human civilization and the development of the materials science discipline, this programme aims to cultivate interdisciplinary leading talents with a strong sense of national pride and social responsibility, possessing a solid foundation in natural science, materials science and engineering, and humanities, and possessing the abilities of innovation and lifelong learning. We aim to develop interdisciplinary leading talents who can engage in design and development, manufacturing, engineering management, and scientific research in fields such as mechanical manufacturing, electronic information, telecommunications, computing, and biopharmaceuticals related to materials and chemical engineering. Students who have completed their studies will be able to pursue higher degrees and research within universities in China and internationally or careers in world famous enterprises and international organization. (Queen Mary University of London Engineering School, Northwestern Polytechnical University (QMES), 2024)

On the textual level, modality has become more idealistic and strategic. Expressions like “the programme aims to,” “we aim to,” and “students will be able to” shift the focus from regulating student behavior to building a long-term vision for graduate development institutions. The main agency is mostly given to institutions, positioning universities as designers of future talent rather than just providers of education. Nominalization still legitimizes institutional goals, and the shift from “qualified and innovative talent” to “interdisciplinary leading talents” reflects an upgraded graduate identity, positioning students as future leaders in science and innovation. Evaluative words like “leaders,” “solid foundation,” and “human civilization” further link higher education to scientific progress, national development, and global contribution.

For discursive practice, this passage shows a highly integrated form of interdiscursivity. State, academic, market, and international logics all show up at the same time through specific expressions. Unlike previous programme goals where these institutional priorities mostly appeared as parallel educational objectives, the 2024 discourse integrates them into a unified representation of graduate identity, linking disciplinary excellence, interdisciplinary innovation, global engagement, and national commitment together without showing conflict or hierarchy.

From the perspective of social practice, the 2024 curriculum reflects the most mature stage of institutional adaptation observed in the five documents. This programme no longer tries to balance the demands of different institutional logics, but instead strategically integrates the logic of the state, academic, market, and international perspectives into a unified educational philosophy. These logics are combined through discourse to jointly create a coherent model of the ideal talents. This increasingly integrated discourse aligns closely with the transformation stage identified in SNA, suggesting that as the Sino-UK cooperative education network becomes more mature and diverse, institutional discourse has gradually evolved from simply meeting multiple expectations to presenting them as an internally coherent and strategically aligned institutional identity, and emphasising the combination of global governance and national strategic development.

The quoted excerpts from talent cultivation schemes show a trajectory from coexisting multiple institutional logics toward strategic integration. Early-year schemes (as of cohorts 2017, 2018, 2019) mainly focused on building graduates’ identities around academic skills and international mobility, while later-year schemes (as of cohorts 2021, 2024) gradually incorporated stronger national priorities, interdisciplinary innovation, and global governance. This discourse did not simply replace one logic with another; instead, it continuously negotiated and recombined multiple logics to maintain legitimacy in a constantly changing institutional environment. These micro-level changes in discourse align closely with the macro-

level evolution revealed by SNA. As Sino-UK cooperative education networks expand, integrate, and move into a transformation phase, their organisational discourse shifts from expressing multiple institutional expectations to presenting a coherent educational vision.

DISCUSSION

SNA results show that the development of Sino-UK cooperation should not just be seen as a simple, steady increase in numbers. At first, cooperation was mainly focused on a few pioneering universities, but later it became more dispersed and diverse. This pattern suggests that Sino-UK collaboration has evolved from initial experimental attempts into a more mature institutional field. This finding supports Knight (2016)'s idea that TNHE is a dynamic process rather than a static institutional arrangement. It also echoes de Wit and Altbach (2021)'s observation that contemporary TNHE is gradually shifting from rapid expansion to a more strategic and quality-oriented development. This study goes a step further by showing how the structural patterns of institutional cooperations have evolved over time. By revealing changes in the network structure, rather than just the number and scale of partners, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of institutional development in Sino-UK cooperative education.

CDA findings show that institutional adaptation does not happen by simply replacing one institutional logic with another. Instead, universities keep negotiating multiple logics, such as state, academic, market and international logics, through organisational discourse. This finding aligns with the claims of Thornton et al. (2012), who think that organisations usually operate under multiple coexisting institutional logics rather than just one dominant logic. It also supports the points made by Cai and Mountford (2022), that higher education institutions continuously balance competing institutional expectations in an increasingly complex governance environment. The findings show that the legitimacy of Sino-UK cooperative education is not about choosing between competing logics, but about strategically integrating these logics into a coherent organisational discourse. However, even though different institutional logics seem to complement each other, analysis shows that their power relations are not totally equal. The state logic always sets the overall rules, and academic, market, and international logics are included in it. These logics are picked to reinforce institutional legitimacy while staying in line with government priorities. More broadly, effective TNHE depends not only on institutional networks but also on the capacity to negotiate and contextualize international agendas. As internationally oriented reforms are mediated by local priorities and institutional capacities (Kanoksilapatham, 2026), Sino-UK cooperation involves ongoing institutional adaptation, with collaborative structures and discursive practices shaping talent cultivation. CDA further illuminates how institutional actors construct, negotiate, and legitimize educational models through discourse (Fairclough, 2010).

More importantly, this study shows the value of combining macro-level network analysis with micro-level discourse analysis. By combining SNA with CDA, this study demonstrates how organisational discourse develops together with broader structural changes. The findings suggest that institutional discourse acts as a mechanism that allows universities to interpret, negotiate, and respond to changing policy environments and cooperation structures. This integrated perspective expands existing research by showing how structural evolution and discourse practices work together to shape the development of Sino-UK cooperative education.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, its emphasis on Sino-UK cooperative education restricts the applicability of the results to other TNHE environments. Secondly, the SNA is based on officially recognised partnerships, which may miss informal or temporary collaborations. Thirdly, the qualitative analysis is based on talent cultivation schemes from a specific case, thus failing to encompass the full range of discursive practices present in all programmes.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides significant implications. Theoretically, it illustrates that the institutionalization of TNHE is influenced by both changing partnership frameworks and the discursive negotiation of conflicting institutional logics, thereby connecting macro- and micro-level perspectives in higher education research. Methodologically, the combined SNA-CDA framework offers a versatile method for investigating institutional change in other transnational contexts. Practically, the results indicate that successful TNHE governance and talent development

necessitate a balance between state priorities, academic values, market needs, and international goals, allowing institutions to create educational models that are both globally competitive and locally relevant.

CONCLUSION

This study traces the development of Sino-UK cooperation networks from 1995 to 2025 and analyses the institutional logics inherent in the talent cultivation schemes of a key partnership. It reveals that Sino-UK transnational education has transformed into a multifaceted and progressively institutionalized domain. At the macro level, collaborative networks have become increasingly differentiated, interconnected, and strategically organised. At the micro scale, the discourse surrounding talent cultivation has evolved from merely responding to fragmented institutional needs to formulating a hybrid educational model that selectively incorporates state, academic, market, and international logics. The results indicate that institutional transformation is evident not only in the evolving patterns of inter-organisational collaboration but also in the discursive framing and legitimization of educational objectives and graduate identities. From a methodological perspective, the study develops an integrated SNA-CDA framework that connects network evolution with institutional logics, providing a multi-level lens for investigating institutional changes in TNHE and other intricate organisational landscapes.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

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