

What Makes a TNHE Venture in China Successful? Insight from Policy Documents

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Abstract

Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) plays a critical role in China's education internationalisation and national development. While TNHE has expanded rapidly, it faces challenges such as regional disparities, inadequate adaptation of foreign curricula, and weak quality assurance mechanisms. This paper analyses 12 key TNHE policy documents issued between 1986 and 2020, employing Smith's Policy Implementation Model to assess policy formulation, implementation, and outcomes. Findings reveal that TNHE in China has evolved through four key policy phases, successfully integrating international educational resources, diversifying academic disciplines, and enhancing research capacity. However, imbalanced regional distribution and inconsistencies in foreign curriculum alignment persist. To ensure sustainable and high-quality TNHE development, future research should focus on improving regional equity, optimising curriculum localisation, and leveraging AI-driven quality monitoring mechanisms.

Keywords: Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), Internationalisation of Higher Education, Policy Implementation Model, Educational Resource Allocation

Introduction

The accelerating trend of globalisation and internationalisation of higher education has reshaped the landscape of global knowledge exchange (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), as a key component of this trend, refers to educational programmes where institutions from one country deliver academic curricula to students in another country through various models such as joint or double degree programmes, franchised courses, and international branch campuses (Zha, 2012). In recent decades, TNHE has expanded significantly, with major host countries including China, Malaysia, and Singapore, which have actively promoted TNHE as part of their higher education strategies (Mok, 2012; Zha, 2012).

China initially embraced TNHE to address the shortage of domestic higher education resources and to improve the quality of education through international knowledge transfer (Huang, 2003). As the largest sender of international students globally and an emerging leader in TNHE, China has strategically positioned itself as a crucial actor in international education

cooperation. However, unlike Western countries, China's TNHE is not a market-led model but a hybrid approach that combines market mechanisms with strong state guidance (Ka Ho Mok, 2021). This distinctive approach emphasises TNHE as a strategic tool to serve national development goals, especially in improving innovation capabilities in key areas and promoting regional development through educational resources (Yang, 2008).

TNHE has developed in China since the 1980s, largely due to the positive attitude of the central government and the strong financial and political support of local governments (Han, 2017). China's TNHE strategy has gone beyond addressing resource gaps to become an important part of its diplomatic initiatives, especially within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ge & Ho, 2022). By aligning with national strategies such as BRI, TNHE has enhanced regional educational equity and supported the cultivation of talents for modernisation. This unique positioning of TNHE reflects China's broader approach to education modernisation, which is to balance international cooperation with preserving educational sovereignty and meeting local needs (Huang, 2003).

However, challenges such as uneven regional distribution of TNHE programmes and inadequate adaptation of foreign resources persist, highlighting the need for high-quality and sustainable development.

This paper aims to address key questions surrounding TNHE development: Why has China embraced TNHE as a strategic priority? How does China's approach to TNHE compare with that of other nations? What are the primary challenges in implementing TNHE policies? What strategies can be adopted to overcome these challenges and achieve high-quality development?

To explore these questions, this paper first reviews the historical evolution of TNHE policies in China, followed by an analysis of their effectiveness and current implementation challenges. Finally, the paper proposes policy recommendations and future directions to enhance the quality and sustainability of TNHE in alignment with national goals.

Understanding China's TNHE Aspirations from Policy Documents

From 1978 to now, China has issued 12 important TNHE-related policy documents from authoritative sources, including the State Education Commission, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs), the State Council, and the Ministry of Education (see Table 1). The selected period reflects the most significant development of TNHE policy. These documents are crucial as they reflect China's growing ambition in the field of TNHE.

Table 1

TNHE-related policy documents in China

No.	Year	Document	Issuing Department
1	1986	Opinions on Strengthening the Establishment of Schools under Cooperative Programmes	State Education Commission
2	1993	Outline for the Reform and Development of Education in China	State Council
3	1995	Provisional Regulations on TNHE	State Education Commission
4	1996	Circular on Strengthening the Administration of Degree Conferment in TNHE Activities	State Council
5	2001	Interim Measures for the Administration of Foreign Professional Employment in Schools Operated by Social Forces and TNHE	Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs)
6	2003	Regulations on TNHE	State Council
7	2004	Measures for the Implementation of the Regulations on TNHE	Ministry of Education
8	2006	Opinions on Several Issues Concerning TNHE	Ministry of Education
9	2007	Circular on Further Regulation of TNHE Practices	Ministry of Education
10	2009	Evaluation Plan for TNHE	Ministry of Education
11	2013	Opinions on Further Strengthening the Quality Assurance of TNHE in Higher Education Institutions	Ministry of Education
12	2014	Several Opinions on Doing a Good Job of Opening Up Education in the New Era	State Council

To understand the explicit and implicit aspirations embedded in China's TNHE policies, we turn to Smith's Policy Implementation Model (see Figure 1). This model helps to assess the clarity, feasibility, and alignment of policy goals, providing a framework for understanding how national policy is expected to translate into actionable goals for TNHE.

According to Smith's policy implementation model, the success or failure of a policy lies in the interaction of four key factors. Smith's model views policy formulation and policy implementation as two processes that interact with each other. In the policy implementation process, idealised policies, implementing organisations, target groups, and environmental factors interact with each other, starting from initial tensions and adjusting into a state of coordination, with the final implementation results feeding back into the policy formulation process. The cycle of this process contributes to a systematic framework that allows us to analyse in depth the formulation, objectives, implementing organisations, and the external environment of TNHE policies, and thus to identify key issues and challenges in the implementation process, which will provide strong support for future policy formulation and educational practice. The model enables us to understand how China perceives TNHE features and the expectations of the state towards TNHE operators happening in the country.

Education in China clarified the non-profit attributes and educational quality requirements of TNHE, accumulating practical experience for the introduction of subsequent policies. At the same time, the government has gradually recognised the importance of regulating cooperative schooling through systematic management, which has laid the foundation for the legalisation phase (Yang, 2023).

Phase 2: 1995-2002

In 1995, the promulgation of *Provisional Regulations on TNHE* brought TNHE into the stage of institutionalised management (He, 2016). This was the first policy document with legal attributes, clarifying the principles, scope, and approval procedures for TNHE, and providing a legal basis for cooperative schooling (He, 2016). The general principle of this document is “to strengthen the management of Chinese-foreign cooperative schools and promote the development of China’s education and education exchanges and cooperation with foreign countries” (State Education Commission, 1995). At the same time, the following definition is given for TNHE:

Foreign corporate organisations, individuals, and relevant international organisations cooperate with Chinese educational institutions and other social organisations with legal personality in China to organise educational institutions with Chinese citizens as the main target and implement educational and teaching activities.

(State Education Commission, 1995, Article 2)

Since then, policies such as *Circular on Strengthening the Administration of Degree Conferment in TNHE Activities* in 1996 and *Interim Measures for the Administration of Foreign Professional Employment in Schools Operated by Social Forces and TNHE* in 2001 have further regulated the conferment of degrees, the employment of teachers and the quality of school-running. These policies have refined the management requirements and promoted the transition of TNHE from a macro framework to a specific quality assurance mechanism (Yang, 2023). At the same time, China’s accession to the WTO has promoted the alignment of policy provisions with the rules of trade in education services, and the management of TNHE has been gradually standardised, injecting new impetus for subsequent development.

Phase 3: 2003-2015

In 2003, the promulgation of *Regulations on TNHE* marked the entry of cooperative education into the legal track (He, 2016). To enhance the pertinence and operability of the regulations, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued *the Measures for the Implementation of the Regulations on TNHE* in 2004, which clarified the requirements for the review of organisational management, teaching, and finance. After that, in 2006, MOE issued *the Opinions on Several Issues Concerning TNHE*, which put forward the policy requirement of “Four One-Third Policy”. According to this policy, the proportion of foreign teachers, imported courses, and foreign teaching materials should each makeup one-third of the total content in TNHE programmes. Meanwhile, the public welfare, introduction of high-quality educational resources, enrollment and fees have been regulated, etc. *Circular on Further Regulation of TNHE Practices* was issued in 2007, which put forward policy proposals to further strengthen the supervision, and *the Evaluation Plan for TNHE* was issued in 2009, which clarified the guiding ideology, policy objectives, and organisation of the implementation plan for the evaluation of TNHE and gradually improved the supervision system and made the quality of education more and more satisfactory.

At this stage, the rapid expansion of TNHE has also exposed problems such as low-level duplication of education and priority of economic interests (Gu, 2009; Li, 2018). In 2013, MOE issued *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Quality Assurance of TNHE in Higher Education Institutions*, which emphasised strict approval, running education following the law, and quality orientation. This series of policies has laid the foundation for the high-quality and sustainable development of TNHE.

Phase 4: 2016-present

In 2016, MOE issued *Several Opinions on Doing a Good Job of Opening Up Education in the New Era*, which put forward that TNHE has entered a new stage of improving quality and efficiency, serving the overall situation, and focusing on promoting the educational action of the BRI and the construction of the mechanism of humanistic exchanges (Cheng & Koh, 2022). TNHE has not only assumed the responsibility of serving the country's modernisation but has also played a key role in the internationalisation of education and global cultural exchanges (Wei & Hu, 2018).

In 2020, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, the government quickly adjusted the relevant policy and issued *the Circular on the Temporary Expansion of Independent Enrolment Quotas for TNHE to Address Study Abroad Challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic*, to help students affected by the epidemic to resolve their difficulties in studying abroad. This policy fully embodies flexibility and adaptability, and at the same time promotes the standardisation of TNHE and the development of emergency management capacity.

Outcomes of TNHE Implementation in China

Introduction of International Educational Resources

The introduction of international high-quality educational resources has always been the core goal of the TNHE policy, which aims to optimise the allocation of domestic educational resources and enhance the internationalisation level of Chinese higher education (Huang, 2003). With the support of the policy, TNHE has achieved remarkable results in introducing international high-quality educational resources (Mok & Sawn Khai, 2024). By the end of 2020, there were 2,332 TNHE institutions and programmes in China, of which 1230 were above the undergraduate level, and there were more than 300,000 students enrolled in TNHE above the undergraduate level in China (Liu & Kong, 2024). Its scale demonstrates that policy goals effectively expand educational opportunities and optimise resource allocation.

Typical examples include NUIST Reading Academy, which was jointly founded by the Nanjing University of Information Engineering and the University of Reading in the UK, focuses on in-depth cooperation in the field of atmospheric sciences, and has trained some permanent representatives of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). According to statistics, the alumni of this college account for about 70% of the Chinese professors in the field of meteorology overseas, and there are ministerial officials of meteorological departments from 11 countries who have furthered their studies here (Lin et al., 2024). Similar high-level cooperation programmes show that TNHE not only promotes the internationalisation of education but also demonstrates a strong capability in the cultivation of high-end talents through the introduction of international high-quality academic resources and disciplinary advantages (Mok & Sawn Khai, 2024).

Diversification of Disciplines and Levels

In terms of specialisation, TNHE has developed from the initial dominance of business administration to more than 200 specialisations covering 11 major disciplines, including natural sciences, engineering, medicine, humanities, and social sciences, thus realising a comprehensive expansion across fields (Liu & Kong, 2024). This diversification has effectively met the diversified needs of China's economic and social development. For example, Queen Mary University of London Engineering School established by Northwestern Polytechnic University and Queen Mary University of London has introduced world-class engineering resources to the western region of China, which not only promotes the scientific research level of local universities but also serves the development of key industries such as aerospace in the region. In addition, the number of cooperation programmes and institutions at the postgraduate level has gradually increased, providing new channels for the cultivation of high-end scientific research talents and elite innovative talents.

Boosting Research Capacity and Driving Innovation through TNHE

TNHE has provided new momentum for Chinese universities to improve their research capacity and expand their social service functions (K. H. Mok, 2021). For example, the University of Nottingham Ningbo has produced 63.4% of its international cooperation papers in the past five years, significantly higher than the 28.2% of "C9 League" (a group of nine prestigious and leading higher education institutions in China). The university has not only actively introduced international cooperation and exchange platforms in the field of scientific research, but also attracted many high-level experts and scholars. During the 13th Five-Year Plan period, the university introduced more than 40 renowned professors from Oxford University, Cambridge University, and other world-class universities (Lin et al., 2024). These results show that TNHE is not only effective in talent cultivation but also plays an active role in knowledge production and technological innovation (Alemu, 2020; Li et al., 2024).

Key Issues in the Implementation of TNHE Policy

Although the policy of TNHE has achieved remarkable results in promoting the internationalisation of higher education and the introduction of high-quality educational resources, it still faces a series of problems and challenges in the process of policy implementation and practice (Zhang, 2023). These problems are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

Imbalanced Structural Layout

TNHE programmes and institutions are still highly concentrated in the eastern coastal regions (He, 2016). The data shows that TNHE presents a significant "strong in the east and weak in the west" spatial distribution characteristic (see Figure 2). Spatial correlation analysis reveals that the Yangtze River Delta region (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai) has formed an obvious high-value agglomeration area, with TNHE institutions and programmes in the three provinces and cities accounting for 27.4% of the national total. Meanwhile, economically and educationally developed regions such as Beijing (126) and Guangdong (119) also have a significant number of TNHE programmes and institutions. In contrast, TNHE programmes in the central and western regions, especially in provinces with relatively weak economic and educational resources, are insufficient (Hou et al., 2014; Sun, 2017). For example, the number of TNHE in the central and western regions, such as Gansu (6), Qinghai (2), and Tibet (0), is generally low, showing significant regional disparities in development. This imbalance in

regional distribution not only limits the opportunities for students in the central and western regions to receive high-quality international education but also fails to give full play to the potential of TNHE in promoting the balanced development of regional education (Hou et al., 2014).



Figure 2 Distribution of the number of TNHE institutions and programmes by province

According to the TNHE supervision information platform data from the Ministry of Education, TNHE institutions and programmes are primarily concentrated in Western countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, and fewer than 20 percent of the institutions and programmes are conducted in cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road.

Because of the current situation of regional imbalance, policy measures should prioritise expanding high-quality TNHE to the central and western regions. It is recommended to encourage high-quality TNHE to expand to these regions through financial subsidies and programmes incentives. At the same time, key support programmes should be prioritised in the “Double First-Class” universities in the central and western regions, and regional cooperation in characteristic disciplines should be carried out with countries along the Belt and Road. Through these measures, the balanced distribution of high-quality educational resources across the country will be promoted, and regional specialisation and international collaboration will be enhanced.

Inadequate Adaptation of External Resources

Chinese and foreign partners often experience delays and inconsistencies in policy formulation, which can lead to misalignment of goals and expectations (Qin, 2007). Some foreign partner HEIs fail to fully consider local Chinese educational needs and cultural backgrounds in their curriculum, teaching methods, and management modes, and problems such as low teaching quality and inappropriate curriculum design are common (Qin, 2007). For example, due to limitations in language proficiency and differences in listening habits, some Chinese students in TNHE institutions often struggle to adapt to classroom modes that

rely entirely on foreign-language instruction and emphasise “group discussions” and “student presentations”. This makes it impossible for international education concepts, curriculum design, teaching materials, and teaching methods to be given full play in Chinese classrooms, thus affecting the effectiveness of teaching and the internationalisation level of talent cultivation (Lin, et al., 2024). In addition, the balance between language learning and professional learning is difficult to be effectively achieved, and students face greater difficulties in mastering professional knowledge in foreign languages (Bovill et al., 2015), which has become a key problem restricting the TNHE from improving the quality of internationalised top-notch innovative talents training.

Discussion

Although the existing TNHE policies have been effective in promoting TNHE, it was found that four critical areas are necessary to address.

There is a lack of continuous quality supervision in actual operation, and some programmes may experience a decline in education quality or deviate from the original school operation goals. At the same time, the qualification review and exit mechanism of foreign institutions has not been fully improved, making it difficult to ensure the efficient allocation of resources. To solve these problems, it is necessary to establish a dynamic quality monitoring and evaluation system to track the teaching quality, student employment rate, and internationalisation results of cooperative programmes in real-time, using big data and artificial intelligence technology (Dong, 2023). In addition, information disclosure and transparent supervision are crucial (Magrath, 2015). This can be achieved by improving the information disclosure system, enhancing the supervision capacity of society and policymakers, and promptly initiating rectification or exit procedures for programmes with long-term poor performance (Liu & Kong, 2024). The dynamic monitoring mechanism should also be combined with a quality early-warning system to ensure that cooperative projects can be continuously optimized according to the operating conditions, and ultimately achieve efficient allocation of resources and improvement of education quality (Zhu et al., 2020).

The actual operation is still insufficiently supervised, and some programmes lack continuous quality supervision. These deficiencies may lead to a decline in education quality or deviation from the original purpose of TNHE. Therefore, the localisation adaptation of foreign resources is an important part of improving the quality of TNHE (Zhang, 2023). Foreign universities need to optimise the curriculum, teaching methods, and management models following China’s education landscape, the learning characteristics, and the actual needs of Chinese students (Wu, 2019). For example, practical content should be added to disciplines such as engineering technology to improve students’ practical ability; at the same time, cross-cultural training for foreign teachers to help them better understand and adapt to China’s educational environment and student needs (Mok & Han, 2017). In addition, the scope of cooperation with universities in countries along the “Belt and Road” should be expanded, cross-cultural joint training programmes should be carried out, and resource diversity should be improved (Wu, 2019).

Quality monitoring is the core of ensuring the high-level operation of TNHE (Mok & Han, 2017). It is recommended that a dynamic assessment platform be set up using big data and artificial intelligence technology to monitor education quality, student employment outcomes, and internationalisation indicators of cooperative programmes in real-time (Zhu

et al., 2020). At the same time, a sound exit mechanism should be established to rectify or withdraw cooperative programmes that fail to meet the standards or perform poorly, in the long run, to optimise the allocation of resources and improve the overall educational quality of TNHE (Tran et al., 2023).

TNHE should be more closely integrated with national development strategies and provide human resources support for national key areas. Especially under the framework of the BRI, academic alliance construction, and cultural exchanges should be promoted to strengthen educational cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road and expand the international influence of Chinese education. Meanwhile, the policy should focus on supporting cooperation programmes in disciplines related to national strategic industries such as artificial intelligence, new energy, and biomedicine, to address the shortcomings in the layout of disciplines. Through the optimisation of disciplinary layout and the development of key areas, TNHE can better align with the needs of national modernisation.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper systematically reviews the evolution of TNHE policies since its initial exploration in 1978 and draws several important conclusions through Smith's policy implementation model and comprehensive policy literature analysis.

The paper shows that TNHE has evolved from a mechanism for introducing educational resources to a strategy serving multiple national goals (Liu & Kong, 2024). The policy framework has successfully facilitated the establishment of TNHE institutions and programmes. At the same time, the study reveals the significant contributions of TNHE in three key areas: the introduction of international educational resources, the diversification of disciplines, and the improvement of scientific research capabilities. In particular, the expansion of TNHE from initially business-oriented programmes to more than 200 majors covering 11 major disciplines, fully demonstrates the effectiveness of the policy in broadening educational opportunities and promoting innovation (Wu et al., 2022).

However, several key challenges still require attention. Regional resource imbalances, insufficient adaptability of external educational resources, and limitations in quality assurance mechanisms indicate that, despite the successes of the policy framework in various aspects, it still requires further improvement and refinement. These findings hold significant value for policymakers and educational administrators in designing more targeted and effective strategies for TNHE.

The significance of this paper lies in the comprehensive analysis of policy evolution and implementation effects, which provides a basis for future policy optimisation. This deepens the understanding of transnational education policy implementation in developing countries and offers practical insights for improving international education cooperation. In future research, the following questions are worth further exploration: How can TNHE policies better adapt to regional development needs, while ensuring the quality of education? What mechanisms are needed to ensure better cultural and pedagogical adaptability of external educational resources? What role should TNHE assume in China's broader strategy of educational modernisation and international influence?

This paper argues that TNHE has achieved remarkable success in promoting the internationalisation of education, but its future development needs to strike a more delicate balance, particularly between international standards and local needs, quality assurance and educational innovation, and regional equity and resource optimisation. The findings and suggestions put forward in this paper provide a valuable foundation for policymakers to guide TNHE development in a more sustainable direction.

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