

A Review of Motivations and Determinants in Student Choice of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this review is to search through the influencing mechanism of the choice of Sino-foreign cooperative education programs by students systematically. As this model is growing fast in the process of internationalizing education in China, it is important to determine the determinants of student attraction to the model to maximize the quality of education and policy making. The proposed study will take a systematic literature review methodology and will be carried out by utilizing strategic searches and rigorous screenings in Scopus databases and synthesizing the literature in accordance to a multi-level system of analytical framework. The study also shows the weakness of the current literature on the subject in long-term tracking and richness of qualitative knowledge. The conclusions of this paper not only integrate scattered empirical evidence, providing a foundation for constructing a localized theory of educational choice, but also offer empirical support for educational institutions to precisely enhance the competitiveness of their programs and for government departments to optimize institutional design, and point out future research directions such as dynamic decision-making processes and cross-cultural comparisons.

Keywords: Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education, Student Choice, Enrollment Motivation, Decision Determinants, Transnational Higher Education, Literature Review

Introduction

Sino-foreign Cooperative Education (SFCE), a unique product of the intersection between the internationalization of higher education in the context of globalization and the reform of domestic education in China, serves as a core carrier of the country's "opening up of education to the outside world" strategy (Junyi & Zainudin, 2024). By introducing high-quality educational resources from abroad, this model has created a "third path" between the traditional domestic education system and full-time overseas study. Its development process closely aligns with China's transformation from mass higher education to quality-oriented development, becoming an important platform for cultivating high-level talents with an international perspective and a good understanding of international rules (Zhao, 2022). In addition to contributing greatly to the supply system of higher education in China, this model encourages the general reformation of the domestic higher educational system in regards to

curriculum innovation, development of the faculty and model management. Its social value is not merely expressed in the development of talent but also enhancing culture exchange, supporting economic growth in the region, and reacting to the challenge of talent in the world.

With the help of SFCE, China has tremendously contributed to the higher education sector which has seen Chinese students gain access to international education programs, international faculty and international accredited degrees without necessarily having to go outside of China. By 2020, around 600,000 students were allowed to graduate SFCE programs, and many of them secured their jobs in the multinational business or went to universities and colleges abroad (Ochoa-Cueva et al., 2023). According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2019, 80 percent of SFCE graduates surveyed said they had improved intercultural competence, foreign language proficiency, and critical thinking, as compared to their colleagues in conventional Chinese programs (Ministry of Education of China, 2019).

Although Sino-foreign cooperative education has made remarkable gains, it still has to face some long-standing challenges (Jinhui & Mengjin, 2019). It often becomes hard to integrate foreign curricula, assessment standards and faculty recruitment systems due to institutional and operational barriers. Pedagogical and cultural differences also pose the threat of tension in the collaboration process, which may lead to a decrease in the quality of education and the experience of students (Gamaliia et al., 2023). In addition, the relatively high tuition costs of these programs in comparison to those offered domestically have raised the issue of expense and accessibility. Researchers note that it is essential to enhance the quality assurance processes, the cultural integration and innovation, and alignment to the national strategic priorities. Sino-foreign cooperative education can even more change the landscape in higher education in China with long-term policy support and institutional protection and increase its impact on the world (Si, 2024). Irrespective of these macro-level analyses of the challenges and policies, there is a gaping hole of knowledge as to the micro-level dynamics that potentially drive the system: the students themselves. Thus, to make sure that SFCE develops in the way that would be sustainable and focused on the needs of students, the key is to focus less on what institutions provide and more on why students prefer them.

This shift in focus necessitates a systematic understanding of the general decision-making mechanisms in higher education (Srivastava & Dhamija, 2022). At the individual level, the driving forces within the organization are career development expectations and professional interests. It is normal that students prefer those institutions and majors which are able to provide good employment assistance and have a good reputation in the industry. At the same time, the selection preferences directly depend on certain qualities that include academic reputation and quality of teaching, the facilities and environment of the campuses, geographical location and living costs, as they reflect the rational calculation model of students when considering their needs to develop individually and the conditions of reality (Almanwari et al., 2024).

Moreover, social networks and environmental factors are also a crucial aspect of the multi-level facet of student choice in Sino-foreign cooperative education (Si & Rayner, 2025). Family background, which includes, parental education, occupation, values, and monetary capacity, is an underlying effect, the familial background influences decisions directly, providing

resources and directives and indirectly, in terms of culture. These social reference points are further supported by peer norms and recommendations by the teachers of secondary schools. These wider sociocultural attitudes, including the status of the institution and the symbolic worth of an international degree, are interacting with the labor market regulations of requiring globally capable graduates to create a decisive external context (Qiana, 2024). The combination of these environmental and relational variables in interaction with individual-level motivations creates a complex motivational environment which characterizes the enrollment into transnational educational programs.

The research has an original contribution to the social sciences by being the first to synthesize the disjointed content regarding student choice in Sino-foreign Cooperative Education (SFCE) in the PRISMA framework. Although much of the current literature has tended to concentrate on one factor or macro-level policy analysis, this review provides a combined, multi-dimensional perspective of the interaction of personal motivations, institutional features, and external environments to influence educational choices (Jinhui & Mengjin, 2019; Si & Rayner, 2025; Qiana, 2024; Si, 2024). In theory, it would fill the gap between the policy studies of higher education and the study of consumer behavior theory because it offers a comprehensive picture of future research in transnational education. In practice, the results can provide practical guidance to SFCE administrators and policymakers who are interested in making the program more attractive and modernization institutional offerings to student demands in a competitive global education market.

Purpose of the Review

This study aims to explore the multi-dimensional factors influencing students' educational choices through a systematic literature review, focusing on the following two core questions: What are the previous studies on the personal, institutional, and external environmental factors affecting students' educational choices?

What are the main findings of existing research on the process and mechanism by which these factors influence students' educational choices?

Through the systematic integration and review of existing scientific literature, this study is dedicated to clarifying the complex mechanism influencing students' educational decisions, systematically sorting out the key research findings and interactions among the three dimensions of personal motivation, institutional characteristics, and external environment, thereby comprehensively depicting the current understanding of this issue and providing a solid knowledge base for related research and practice.

The review follows the standardized method of systematic review and meta-analysis (PRISMA), as it attempts to respond to the above research questions with clear and systematic steps of search, screening, analysis, and synthesis. The study purpose is not to just categorize and synthesize existing findings, elucidate essential findings and recommendations that may inform practice, but to additionally determine the data and mental gaps in the current studies, which will give guidelines on how to augment the already available materials and standards. Finally, the study will contribute to evidence-based decision-making resources among the educational institutions, educators, and policymakers on the practical level and advance the standardized implementation of systematic review techniques in educational research.

Methodology

Systematic review is a more rigorous research technique (Fan et al., 2022). It is based on its fundamental principle of gathering, filtering and combining large volumes of literature in a systematic and standardized way thus creating a comprehensive and integrated evidence system (AlShamsi et al., 2022). This does not only eliminate the limitations of the sample or contextual prejudices that might be present in one study, but it also is an effective means of combining the findings of research studies in different times, Spaces and conditions, to generate a panoramic knowledge graph of particular research questions. In comparison to traditional narrative reviews, systematic reviews are much more reliable and reproducible in that they use explicit search strategies, use clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, and provide a standardized method of quality evaluation (Shaheen et al., 2023). This gives the evidence base more foundation and prevents bias that can be brought about due to subjective choice of literature by the researchers.

On these strong grounds of evidence, systematic reviews can derive scientific conclusions that are approximated nearer to objective truth. It may be used to spot common results among the studies, as well as indicate the contradictions or gaps in the existing evidence by comparing and integrating the data of several sources. Such combination analysis is not only useful in that it assists the academic community and policymakers in overcoming the constraints of each single study and developing more general and guiding theoretical constructions and a practical set of recommendations, but also gives a clear map on the way forward on further research (Gunnell et al., 2022).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This review adhere to clear literature screening guidelines. The inclusion criteria mainly include: academic literature published within a specific time frame, peer-reviewed journal articles, and empirical studies conducted in cooperative educational environments (such as school-enterprise cooperation, cross-institutional joint training, etc.). The exclusion criteria involve: non-empirical research (such as pure theoretical discussions or opinion comments), literature that is not directly relevant to the topic "The Impact of Students' Motivation and Decision-making on the Choice of Cooperative Education", and studies for which the full text cannot be obtained or the data report is incomplete.

Search Strategy

In order to address the literature in point, this study performed a systematic search in mainstream academic databases. The search terms were formulated through the combination of such core ideas as student motivation, decision-making process, co-operative educational choice and their synonyms and similar words. The search was done using a combination of subject terms and free words and reference literature was traced to complement the possible relevant literature.

Selection Process

81 records were first located in various databases. Once the duplicates were eliminated and those not identified as per the acquired exclusion criteria were eliminated, the screening process was completed as shown in Figure 1.

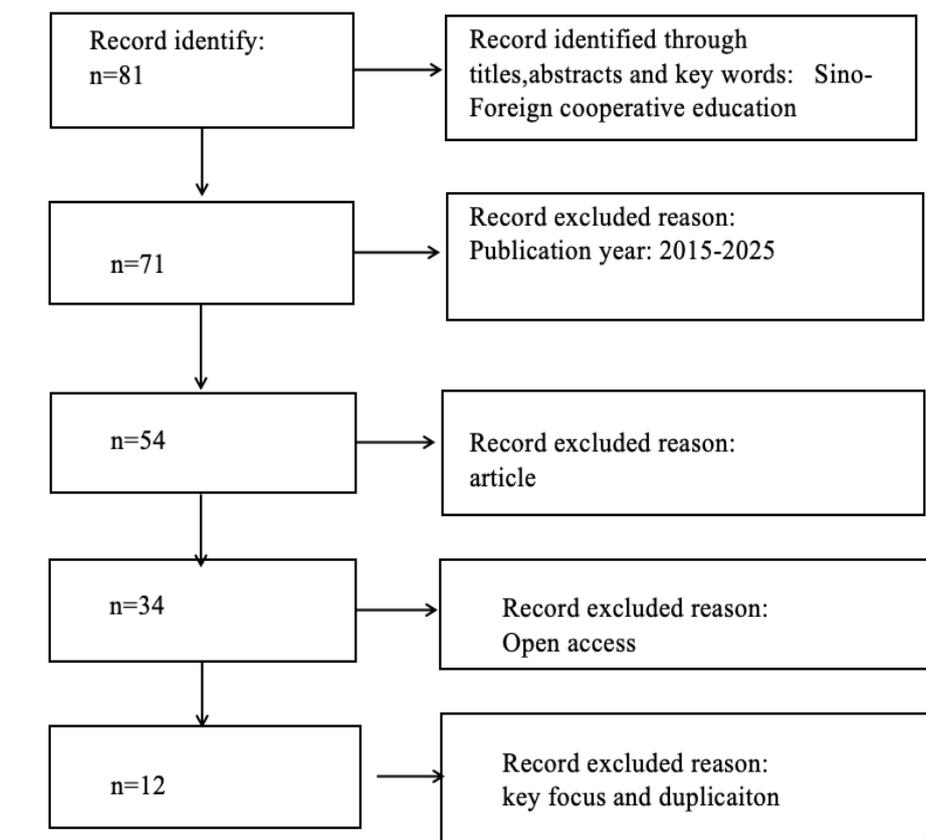


Figure 1: the selection process of :Systematic review of the related literature

These three step systematic literature screening are depicted in Figure 1:

Stage 1: The authors collectively examined the titles and abstracts of records initially retrieved, and weeded out those obviously not pertinent to the study topic of interest.

Stage 2: The rest of the records were screened twice (by the year of publication (2015-2025) and by the language (English only)). Records that did not match were excluded.

Stage 3: The remaining literature underwent full-text evaluation based on selective parameters which included methodology, participants, scope and areas of focus. All the articles were individually assessed on their adherence to the inclusion criteria, and the divergence or uncertainty was discussed collectively until an agreement was achieved.

Quality Assessment

To ensure the scientific reliability of the studies included in the research, a suitable quality assessment tool for empirical research in the social sciences was used. The literature was evaluated in terms of research design, sample representativeness, the rigor of data collection and analysis methods, and the completeness of result reporting. The assessment process was independently completed by two researchers, and the results will undergo consistency testing.

Data Extraction

The research data will be systematically extracted through standardized forms. The main contents include: the authors of the research, the publication year, the research area and context, the research design and methods, the characteristics and scale of the sample, the measurement methods of core variables (such as motivation types, decision influencing

factors, cooperative education choice behaviors, etc.), the main research results and conclusions, as well as the limitations of the research.

Discussion

By systematically reviewing and comparing the 12 included studies, this research found that although the specific expressions and research contexts varied, the motivations and determinants for students to choose cooperative education programs between China and abroad exhibited clear and comprehensible clustering characteristics. The existing evidence indicates that this decision is not driven by a single factor, but rather is a complex process of rationality and emotion interwoven under the influence of multiple forces. To clearly present this comprehensive picture, this paper integrates the main findings into four core dimensions, as shown in Table 1. This table not only summarizes the key constituent factors and core connotations of each dimension, but also, through the assessment of consensus in the literature, intuitively reveals the focus of the academic community on different issues and the strength of consensus.

Table 1

Core dimension clustering of motivations and determinants

Core dimension	Factors	Description	Literature consensus degree
Instrumental Rationality Dimension	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employment competitiveness 2. Access to high-quality educational resources 3. Bridge for overseas education advancement 	Students view cooperative education as an investment, and their main goal is to acquire superior human capital (such as foreign diplomas, language skills, and international certification courses) in order to secure better career prospects and further education opportunities. This is the most prominent motivation in most of the literature.(Xiao, 2024 ; Zou et al., 2022; Liu & Jin, 2025)	High level
Experience and Growth Dimension	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. International Perspective and Cultural Experience 2. Educational Model and Personal Development 3. Transition and Adaptation 	Students pursue non-utilitarian personal growth, which includes exposure to diverse cultures, training in cross-cultural communication skills, experiencing student-centered Western-style teaching, and making a smooth psychological and skill-based transition for future overseas life.(Chiocca & Zhang, 2023 ; Han, 2023; Hang & Zhang, 2025)	Moderate high level
External influence dimensions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family social and economic capital 2. Peer and role model influence 3. Information and admission policies 	Decision-making is highly driven by the external environment. Family background (economic strength, parents' educational concepts), the choices of classmates around, as well as the information and admission incentives provided by schools/agents	Moderate level

		(such as reduced admission scores, scholarships) play a crucial role in either promoting or restricting the process.(Tse & Zhou, 2025; Lai & Jung, 2025)	
"Push-pull" Contextual Dimension	1. Push Factors: Pressure from the college entrance examination competition, dissatisfaction with traditional education 2. Pull Factors: Project characteristics and reputation, cost-effectiveness as an alternative to studying abroad	The decision is formed under the combined influence of the "push force" of the Chinese educational environment and the unique advantages of the cooperative education program. Students often make "bounded rational" choices through comparison.(Zhang, 2023 ; Miani & Picucci-Huang, 2023)	Moderate level

Through a systematic integration of existing literature, this study finds that students' decisions to choose and evaluate Sino-foreign cooperative education programs are mainly driven by two core dimensions: instrumental rationality and experiential growth, and are regulated by external contexts. The instrumental rationality dimension dominates, with students viewing it as a key investment to enhance their human capital, focusing on its role in boosting employment competitiveness (Xiao, 2024) and its practical value as an efficient stepping stone for overseas studies (Zou et al., 2022; Liu & Jin, 2025). At the same time, the dimension of experience and growth is equally crucial, as students aspire to achieve personal development and identity reconstruction through a cross-cultural environment. This includes freshmen's expectations of a unique learning experience (Chiocca & Zhang, 2023), as well as the process of students actively building critical thinking and subjectivity (Han, 2023), and managing academic transitions through personal initiative (Hang & Zhang, 2025). Notably, this experience is not one-dimensional, and students' specific evaluations of the learning experience are complex (Tse & Zhou, 2025), often embedded in a structural paradox within the process of internationalization, where they simultaneously pursue integration and cope with the resulting tensions (Lai & Jung, 2025).

This decision has to be interpreted in a special context of push-pull. The primary push is domestic educational competition and the primary pull is the study abroad without leaving the country solution of cooperative education. The resultant final decision and contentment of the students is a dynamic equilibrium between their instrumental needs and developmental goals, which are affected by the external aspects of family and peer groups and aligned to this setting. This multi-dimensional matching degree is the overall assessment of the project by students (Zhang, 2023) and their attitudes to teaching and learning (Miani & Picucci-Huang, 2023), and such a complex behavior involves practical calculation, seeking personal meaning, situational constraints, and realization of some internal contradictions.

On the above core dimensions, this study also indicates that the decision made by students in choice is not merely a mere addition of multiple motivational forces, but a product of interrelationship, competition and compromise among these factors in various situations. This is a complicated process with deep tensions and the particular interaction relations and analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Analysis of the interactive relationship and tension among factors

Types of interactive relationships	Description	Related Reference
Synergy and Reinforcement	Students with superior family socioeconomic capital often have their instrumental rational motives and experiential growth motives simultaneously fulfilled, creating a reinforcing cycle.	Hang & Zhang (2025) point out that students' initiative is the key to effectively utilizing project resources. This corroborates Bourdieu's capital theory, where economic, cultural, and social capital can be mutually transformed and jointly optimize educational choices.
Contradictions and Tensions	Students yearn for profound international cultural experiences and critical thinking training, but due to the management culture, curriculum design, or geopolitical discourse in the actual operation of the programs, they may feel let down or struggle with their identities.	Lai & Jung (2025) revealed the "internationalization paradox"; Han (2023) described the "struggle" of students in constructing their subjectivity amid discourse conflicts. This reflects the gap between ideals and reality, the "pull" and subsequent "experiences", and represents a structural tension.
Compromise and Trade-offs	When instrumental rationality conflicts with deep-seated growth aspirations, students may adopt pragmatic strategies, prioritizing instrumental goals and partially sacrificing or adjusting growth-oriented expectations.	Tse & Zhou (2025) found that students' evaluations of their learning experiences are complex and diverse, suggesting a trade-off in their satisfaction. This aligns with the bounded rationality decision-making model, where students do not pursue the optimal but seek a "satisfactory solution" under constraints.
Evolution and Dynamics	Students may evolve from being dominated by "utilitarian expectations" before enrollment to placing greater emphasis on "process-based growth" after enrollment; or vice versa, due to increased employment pressure, they may strengthen instrumental rationality.	Chiocca & Zhang (2023) focused on students' expectations, while Hang & Zhang (2025) studied transition management. The combination of these two studies reveals the dynamic process of motivation. Motivation is contextual and process-oriented, and can be analyzed in conjunction with the consumer decision-making process model.

As shown in Table 2, the motivational factors exhibit complex interactive relationships in real situations, rather than being isolated or static combinations. A core tension exists between instrumental rationality and experiential growth. Although students have clear expectations

of achieving personal development and cultural integration through an international environment (Chiocca & Zhang, 2023), they often encounter structural paradoxes and challenges brought about by course design, management models, and even macro ideological discourses in reality (Lai & Jung, 2025; Han, 2023). In the face of this tension, students' decision-making logic shifts from a one-way pursuit of a certain value to a strategic practice of seeking feasible paths in contradictions (Hang & Zhang, 2025), and their evaluation of learning experiences thus becomes complex and multi-faceted (Tse & Zhou, 2025). This dynamic interaction and negotiation process profoundly indicates that understanding students' educational choices must go beyond a simple listing of motivations and analyze them within a constantly evolving and inherently tense practical field.

Limitation

However, despite the fact that this study has managed to draw out the four fundamental dimensions, which students consider and their interactive relationship out of a systematic review, it has limitations. The available empirical research depends largely on cross-sectional surveys on one institution (Chiocca & Zhang, 2023; Tse & Zhou, 2025), but they are not based on large-scale, cross-regional longitudinal tracking data, which does not allow learning more about the multidimensional process of dynamic development of student-choice itself. The majority of the research is based on the best or single cooperative institutions of education or a particular group of students (like an international freshmen) and does not pay enough attention to cooperative projects in local undergraduate applied colleges (Liu & Jin, 2025) and on a larger pool of student backgrounds, which might impact the reliability of the research findings. Lastly, the available literature also has excessive dependency on self-report data of students with no incorporation of parental, teacher, and administrative views and perceptions, thus making it hard to fully expose the multifaceted social interaction and institutional influence on the decision-making process.

The current research also lacks a lot in relation to the theoretical construction and contextual understanding. A majority of the research lies at the descriptive phenomena and cannot bring in depth of dialogue with well-developed theoretical constructs to thus, hamper bolstering of the explanatory force of these investigations. Also, the literature is not sensitive of changes in the macro-level context. The dynamic development of international relationships, educational policy, and the employment sector on the international scale in the recent past, including the pandemic trend of studying abroad and increased interest in domestic postgraduate examinations, how to modify the logic of choice among students, has been under-researched. The study of the paradox by Lai and Jung (2025) was a paradox research which went along the aspect but failed to engage in a systematic analysis. Furthermore, some of the studies cited factors in the teaching practice level but have not provided a definite empirical relationship in the specific sense of how such factors affect the choice decisions of the students. The effort of future research ought to be more advanced and diversified, more theoretical building and discourse as well as keeping close watch to the continuous changes in both internal and external settings to constitute a more inclusive and proactive cognition.

Recommendation

Depending on the results and limitations of this review, it is advisable that future research should proceed further at the following three areas: In terms of methodology, it should take the form of longitudinal tracking research design and mixed research methods. By means of

considering the dynamic development of motivation in students and the role of several stakeholders through long-term and multi-point studies, the data collection will be integrated into the large-scale questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Concerning the theoretical modelling, advanced magazines like rational choice theory, cultural capital theory or cross-cultural adaptation theory ought to be actively integrated. They should not only be applied to describe the dilemma between instrumental rationality and the growth experiences (Lai & Jung, 2025) but also one should strive to create a localized model of analysis. The macro dynamics that the research should closely adhere to in the terms of practice and policy should refer to national policies on education, shifts that have taken place in international relations, and employment market trends. In particular, it would examine how these variables mediate the logic of choice of students and offer evidence-based specific suggestions on the curriculum design, student support services, and the strategy of internationalization of cooperative educational institutes and would facilitate the advancement of the study in the topic of describing the phenomenon to explaining the mechanisms and policy formulation.

Conclusion

Through the systematic discoveries of the study, it can be known that the decision of students to participate in cooperative education programs between China and foreign countries is a complicated decision making model dynamically interlaced with calculability of instrumental rationality, pursuit of growth value and external circumstantial restriction. Even though some core dimensions have been identified in the existing literature like employment orientation, stepping stone to further education, cross-cultural experience, and subjectivity construction, even the entire research remains constrained by cross-sectional data, single point of view, and the lack of a dynamic description methodology. There is a pressing need in future to perform the development path of motivation in depth by utilizing longitudinal follow-ups and multi-subject mixed studies, and subsequently use the mature theoretical instruments to elucidate the internal processes of motivation. Concurrently, one should react to emerging variables of the global situation and alterations in the educational policy sensitively. It is only under these conditions of encouraging the study towards dynamicization, theorization, and contextualization that a more elaborative and practical knowledge structure may be formed which can offer indeed powerful academic mentorship to the high quality making of cooperative educational programs as well as to reasonable decision-making of students.

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