

Exploring China-Malaysia Educational Cooperation within the Context of BRI

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Abstract

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, many policies and measures to foster international educational cooperation and exchange have been gradually introduced and implemented. This study aims to explore the key points of China-Malaysia bilateral educational cooperation, discover the laws and needs of cooperation, and summarize good experiences and practices under the policy background of the BRI. It will help form a long-term mechanism for bilateral educational exchange and further improve the quality of education and cultural exchange.

Keywords: China-Malaysia Relations; the Belt and Road Initiative; Educational Cooperation

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1.0 Introduction

Since China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2012, trade, economy, and infrastructure cooperation have deepened. On this basis, the Belt and Road Initiative has gradually become a comprehensive platform for multi-sectoral cooperation between China and its neighboring countries. China's educational cooperation with other countries has flourished within the BRI policy framework, with China-Malaysia educational cooperation leading the way to some extent. According to data released by Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS), 33216 Chinese students applied to study in Malaysia in 2024, accounting for 41.97% of the total number of applications, firmly ranking first (EMGS, 2025). Xiamen University Malaysia, the first branch campus of a well-known Chinese university to be established overseas, became a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative. Leveraging the development of Belt and Road infrastructure projects, China-Malaysia vocational education cooperation has emerged, with a series of apprenticeship programs to cultivate technical talents, such as the Construction Technology Training Course for Malaysia's East Coast Railway Project. These educational collaborations have improved the quality of education in both sides and significantly accelerated personnel exchanges between China and Malaysia, promoting tourism and boosting trade and economic development. Therefore, this research aims to explore the mechanisms, projects, and achievements of China-Malaysia educational cooperation since the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed, to identify the characteristics and patterns, and to summarize the cooperation experience.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Educational Cooperation Analysis Perspective

Scholars will first focus on international students and higher education institutions abroad from the standpoint of educational partnership. For instance, Yang (2020) examined the internationalization of higher education, looked at the exchange of international students between China and the countries along the Belt and Road, and concluded that the education of Malaysian students in China plays a significant role in the trade in education services. Zhang Ying et al. (2024) stated that the Belt and Road Initiative has created a friendly and harmonious international atmosphere for both China and Malaysia, and has led to a continuous expansion of the number of students

studying abroad in both countries. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to formulate regulations for the management and safety of international students and improve international management standards for the international student market. From this perspective, educational cooperation is ultimately complementary to economic and trade exchanges.

Ma (2023) noted that the lack of a regional qualification framework and a long-term cooperation mechanism, poor cooperative education quality, and a lack of awareness of the vocational education community all limit cooperation between China and Malaysia. In this sense, the foregoing issues can be resolved, and deeper and more useful cooperation can be fostered by creating a new vocational education system through the "Luban Workshop" and concurrently creating a regional certification framework system for vocational education. This study is innovative and deserving of notice. More focus should be placed on vocational education, as it is another new area of collaboration between China and Malaysia.

2.2 Policy Analysis Perspective

Hrubý, J. and Petrů, T. (2019) examined how China's cultural diplomacy (CCD) in Malaysia is primarily conducted through two Confucius Institutes and an international campus of a prestigious Chinese institution. They examined cross-border educational cooperation through the lens of cultural diplomacy and discovered that, depending on the period, China and Malaysia's foreign policy impacted Confucius Institutes. They thought foreign organizations like Confucius Institutes may act as hubs for public diplomacy and cultural interactions. China and Malaysia might investigate educational cooperation and exchanges further, given their long history of contact, distinct social and religious frameworks, and diverse and integrated cultural forms. Some cooperation projects between China and Malaysia are carried out under the framework of China-ASEAN cooperation, and educational cooperation is no exception. As Dong and Shi (2024) stated, the China-ASEAN cooperation mechanism is characterized by a relationship between a single entity and a regional group. After the exchange and cooperation in the field of language and culture reach a certain stage, it is urgent to pay attention to national differences. Consequently, from a macro viewpoint, educational cooperation is a microcosm of public diplomacy and can, to some degree, mirror China's and Malaysia's foreign policies. In the case of China and Malaysia, collaborative initiatives in education might be seen as a mechanism that mirrors and reinforces the broader orientation of their respective foreign policies. These projects thus serve as a barometer of bilateral ties, indicating mutual confidence, common development goals, and a commitment to long-term partnership in an ever-changing geopolitical situation.

3.0 Methodology

Semi-structured in-depth interviews serve as the source of primary data for this research, which employs qualitative analysis. According to Deterding and Waters (2021), it is confirmed in their research, which is titled "*Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach*", that in the literature, the sample size of interviews for a qualitative paper should be between 12 and 208 if scientific conclusions are to be drawn. Based on the author's visits to 5 universities and institutions that currently have China-Malaysia educational cooperation projects, and with the help of Victor Yocco's (2017) formula for calculating the sample size of interviewees, 12 interviewees were selected for interviews. In this research, the selection criteria for the respondents are as follows: the primary employees involved in China-Malaysia international educational exchange and collaboration, who refer to the head of some culture-related non-governmental organizations, or staff who have undertaken or experienced international cultural exchange activities. In this research, the interviewees are not restricted by gender. However, they are mainly defined according to their work experience, and their age is required to be between 20 and 60 years old to ensure that the interviewees are at the stage of engaging in cultural exchange programs. In addition, this study was completed in English, and the interview protocol is also in English. Therefore, all the participants must understand English; participants who do not understand English will not be considered. In addition, since the researcher's mother tongue is Chinese, interviewees can be interviewed in Chinese if they are proficient in it. The interview transcripts will be presented in both Chinese and English. Based on the interviews, this research also systematically sorted out relevant research literature and news reports in the past five years as secondary data.

4.0 Findings

4.1 International Students and International Language Education

When China and Malaysia send international students to each other, international language education becomes particularly important. Since English is widely spoken in Malaysia, Chinese students who want to come to Malaysia to study can apply with English language scores, including TOEFL, IELTS, and the Malaysian MUET test. While Malay is not a requirement for applying to study in Malaysia, some universities will offer Malay language courses for international students after they have enrolled in their programs. Malaysian students studying in China must pass the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), and those with the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) are exempt from taking the HSK. In addition, in China, universities such as Jinan University and Huaqiao University publish separate brochures each year to recruit Malaysian students in academic segments ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate, complemented by appropriate scholarship policies. Xiamen University Malaysia also enrolls a certain percentage of students every year in various provinces in China based on the scores of the college entrance examination.

Regarding international education in the Chinese language, the Confucius Institutes should be mentioned. Confucius Institutes are non-profit educational institutions established through China-foreign cooperation. The services offered by the Confucius Institute include Chinese language teaching; training Chinese language instructors and providing Chinese language teaching resources; holding the HSK examination and tests for the Certification of the Chinese Language Teachers; providing information and consultative services concerning China's education, culture, and so forth; and conducting language and cultural exchange activities between China and other

countries. It strengthened the educational and cultural exchange between China and Malaysia. Nowadays, the Confucius Institutes at the University of Malaya and SEGi University are relatively active, with the main activities being cultural festivals, Chinese language competitions, academic seminars, and so on.

4.2 China-Malaysia Cooperative Education Programs

In addition to international students in the traditional sense, the China-Malaysia Cooperative Education Program is also one of the current ways for China and Malaysia to jointly cultivate talents. According to the Education Association between Malaysia and China, the China-Malaysia Joint Education Program is a cooperative program between Chinese educational institutions and Malaysian educational institutions in China, with Chinese citizens as the main target of enrollment. In China, this type of partnership is known as "China-foreign cooperative education", i.e., cooperative education programs between Chinese educational institutions and all foreign educational institutions that enroll students in China (EAMC, 2023). According to the list of registered China-foreign cooperative education institutions and programs issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the current cooperative education programs between China and Malaysia are mainly at the specialized and undergraduate levels.

Take a collaborative project between Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology (SICT) and UCSI University as an example, the two sides have cooperated on two majors, one of which is e-commerce and the other is business management. These two majors use the training program developed by UCSI University. Students first study at SICT for about two years, and if they meet certain assessment requirements for major courses and English, then they can continue their studies at UCSI. SICT is a specialized college that, through cooperation with Malaysian universities, articulates undergraduate education. Students first study in SICT for two years; if they do not go to Malaysia, they can study in SICT for another year and get the diploma of SICT's specialized qualification because three years of study are only enough for the domestic credits; it can only be a specialized qualification. If students complete two years of study at SICT and then go to UCSI for another two years, they can get the SICT graduation certificate and the degree of the University of UCSI, which is a bachelor's degree. SICT enrolls in 1-2 classes every year, and the total number of students is about 40 to 80. The program is bilingual (English and Chinese), with one-third of all courses taught by foreign teachers. Although the tuition fees for the majors jointly run by China and Malaysia in SICT are higher, many students will choose these majors in order to study in better universities, and this is also a way for junior college students to upgrade to a bachelor's degree. Of course, not all students end up studying at UCSI because, on the one hand, the training program for junior college students is based on the training program for undergraduates of Malaysian universities, which is more difficult to study than for ordinary junior college majors, and the assessment standards are also stricter. Regarding this point, there are also English proficiency requirements, so not all students can pass the assessment to continue their studies in Malaysia.

4.3 Vocational Education Cooperation

Relying on the Belt and Road Initiative, some vocational schools in China are promoting "Chinese language + vocational education." After the Belt and Road Initiative was put forward, many Chinese investments and enterprises emerged from China. Under the relevant favorable policies, many Chinese enterprises have been engaged in infrastructure construction and industrial manufacturing in the countries along the Belt and Road. These companies lack Chinese and local language interpreters and local technical talents. For example, the vocational education training organized by the East Malaysia Railway Project department and the internships provided by Zhongguancun for Malaysian college graduates all belong to this category. The mode of "Chinese language + vocational education" meets the most practical needs of the enterprises, cultivates the most needed talents in the shortest period of time, and can effectively alleviate the pressure of the employers and provide employment for the citizens in the local area at the same time. These types of vocational education programs do not belong to academic education and are also called apprenticeship programs. The China-Malaysia railway project has achieved remarkable results in technical cooperation, with many Malaysian students currently receiving technical training in China. Both countries leverage existing university resources to promote the two-way flow of researchers, scholars, and students. The Malaysian Ministry of Education currently regards apprenticeship programs as a key project. Students from some universities, colleges, and vocational schools can attend relevant institutions in China for 1-2 months of technical training.

4.4 Short-term and Online Exchanges

Short-term exchange visits are also not uncommon if studying abroad is a long-term educational and cultural exchange. Before the epidemic, there were relatively many Malaysian students visiting China for exchanges, but after the epidemic, the number decreased, and it is now gradually recovering. These short-term exchanges can be in the form of exchange students, ranging from a few months to a year, or in the form of academic exchanges such as international academic seminars, which are generally shorter in duration, usually about one week to half a month. During the pandemic, China and Malaysia further explored ways to cooperate in education, especially in academic exchanges between the two countries. The development of online international conferences overcame spatial constraints so that experts, scholars, students, etc., from both countries could participate in academic and cultural exchanges between the two countries by simply clicking on the links to the conferences. For example, the final rounds of the 2020 Chinese Bridge Chinese Language Competition for World University and High School Students in Malaysia have been held through live broadcasts on social media. The 5th China-Malaysia International Symposium on the Belt and Road: Maritime Silk Road was held online in November 2021. Starting in 2022, many activities were organized both online and offline. For example, some international academic conferences were organized in two separate formats, online and offline, so participants who could not attend the conference in person could attend it online.

5.0 Discussion

In terms of international students and international language education, the author did not find any exact data on Malaysian students studying in China during the process of collecting information. According to the statistical data on the Ministry of Education of China's website, only the number of international students from Asian countries can be found in China. Regarding Malaysia, the trend of Malaysian students applying to study in China cannot be examined because the precise data is unknown. Compared to the promotion of Confucius Institutes and the "Chinese language + vocational education" model, there are currently only 10 universities in mainland China offering undergraduate Malay language programs, primarily in foreign language and trade programs, representing a relatively low proportion of over 3,000 universities. Compared to the multicultural and multilingual backgrounds of Malaysian students, Chinese students in Malaysia have a lower proficiency in Malay, primarily using English in their daily studies and daily lives, and their understanding of Malay culture is also limited. This is undoubtedly due to Malaysia's cultural background and the widespread use of English in social life.

The duration of the China-foreign cooperative education program is shorter, and students can graduate earlier. Putting aside the advantage of upgrading the qualification of the college degree, the biggest highlight of cooperative education is that it can cultivate students' international outlook, which makes them more recognized in the international arena. At the same time, the graduates of the China-Malaysia cooperative education program will also enjoy some advantages in employment; they have the opportunity to work and start businesses abroad, and are often favored by foreign-funded enterprises and China-foreign joint enterprises in China. The rigorous assessment, on the one hand, is a defining criterion for further studies abroad and, on the other hand, is also an encouraging way to enhance students' abilities.

Li and Bao (2023) believe that the logical trend for China to deepen its higher education cooperation with other BRI countries is to promote economic and trade interactions through higher education cooperation, which is an important basic prerequisite for ultimately achieving coordinated development of education and economy among countries. This research further confirms this view. At the same time, this research believes that vocational education has played a huge role in promoting economic and trade, and infrastructure construction. However, vocational education is not limited to higher education. It also includes non-academic "apprenticeship programs" and corresponding language education. At present, vocational education is becoming increasingly prominent in China-Malaysia educational cooperation. Previous studies have focused on the field of higher education. Therefore, China-Malaysia vocational education cooperation's prospects, mechanisms, platforms, etc., deserve further discussion.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

The very nature of education is such that it is itself a basis for international cooperation. At the micro level, through education, cultural traditions, history, language, and values can be passed on and preserved. From a macro-international relations perspective, through education, global citizenship can be fostered to promote peace and security at the international level. The educational exchanges and cooperation between China and Malaysia are facilitated through the Belt and Road platform, which serves as a means to enhance chances for young people from both nations to pursue overseas education. This research is based on the academic and vocational education projects that are flourishing in China and Malaysia. The programs integrate traditional and vocational education and foreign language instruction to nurture talents for both China and Malaysia, thus contributing to the development and advancement of both nations. Projects at lower levels, such as middle and primary school, were not thoroughly examined in this research. Additional data can be used to support a relevant study. In China, the notion of "education going global" has developed as a prominent and rapidly growing trend within the larger process of educational internationalization. This trend is reflected by the increasing number of famous secondary schools that have built branch campuses abroad, as well as major early childhood education organizations. In the context of China-Malaysia relations, these developments provide a viable route for additional empirical research into their impact on bilateral educational collaboration, cultural diplomacy, and people-to-people connectedness through the Belt and Road Initiative. China and Malaysia have established well-developed systems and achieved notable successes in the realm of educational collaboration. In the forthcoming era, as we endeavor to broaden the horizons of educational collaboration, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive perspective, foster individuals with a global mindset, and establish a distinctive model of educational cooperation that embodies the unique attributes of China and Malaysia.

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