Does international collaboration enhance internationalization of higher education for a non-native English environment? A comparative analysis of NBUIs, China?

Lei Zhou
Department of International Affairs, Yibin University, Yibin, China and
Department of Foundation of Education, Faculty of Educational Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

Gazi Mahabubul Alam
Department of Foundation of Education, Faculty of Educational Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia, and

Roziah Mohd Rasdi
Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education,
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

Abstract

Purpose – A significant number of studies suggest that both international cooperation (IC) and English proficiency (EP) greatly assist internationalization of higher education (IHE). Yet, more evidence is required to confirm their relationship. Hence, this paper intends to investigate whether any association prevails between IC and EP, and if so, how both domains facilitate IHE.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed a qualitative approach to examine how IC and EP potentially influence each other, as well as the way they shape IHE.

Findings – The main key finding reported in this study is that IC plays a significant role in internationalization efforts, with English serving as a critical medium.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that although IC can positively influence EP and the overall level of IHE, the newly built undergraduate institutions (NBUIs) in China should be careful not to fall into the dual traps of number-crunching and income-generation instruments. NBUIs in China may consider changing their IC strategies and seek to join some authoritative or high-reputation networks in other developing countries to expand their horizons.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature on IHE by exploring the connections between IC and EP and how they affect IHE, thus providing insights into advancing institutional internationalization. It is achieved through expanding institutions’ IC or joining international networks while overcoming linguistic barriers.

Keywords International cooperation, English proficiency, Internationalization of higher education, Network, Newly built undergraduate institutions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Studies such as those by DeLaquil et al. (2022) and Knight (2004) suggest international cooperation (IC) greatly influences both the policies and their implementation of internationalization of higher education (IHE). Establishing connections with international education providers or institutions serves six primary purposes: (1) compensating for the...
shortage of resources, finance and know-how; (2) sharing of knowledge, information and technology; (3) increasing opportunities for student and staff members’ international mobility; (4) expanding the potential for courses and curriculum development; (5) conducting collaborative research; and (6) providing joint programs and benchmarks (Chan, 2004; DeLaquil et al., 2022; Hénard et al., 2012; Hudzik, 2016; Knight, 2004; Munusamy and Hashim, 2020).

None of these issues can or should exclude faculty involvement in practical activities such as research and education (Hénard et al., 2012). However, the extent to which faculty staff can participate in international communication is primarily determined by their proficiency in a common language shared by all concerned relevant parties. Thus, foreign language proficiency is crucial in the process of IHE (de Wit, 1997). English, being a widely recognized global lingua franca (ELF), has been chosen as the dominant operational language in the internationalization communication system (MacKenzie, 2018; Wang, 2020). Without a sufficiently high level of English skills shown by academic staff and students, higher education institutions (HEIs) cannot function successfully in the modern world’s global knowledge network (Altbach, 2013), nor can IC be sustained and managed well (Knight, 2007; Marinoni, 2019).

The unparalleled dominance of the English language in science, scholarship and education has propelled the supremacy of the world’s major English-speaking academic institutions. This reality has, however, created difficulties for researchers and universities that do not use English (Altbach, 2007). It is very evident that misunderstandings, cultural ignorance and underestimating what other countries can achieve, emerge due to the rise of this “imperial tongue” (Altbach, 2007). The focus of the present study is on the relationships among IC, English and IHE.

Since the rapid rise of globalization since the late 20th century, which has effectively dismantled national borders (Sutton and Brandenburg, 2022), universities have been increasingly banding together to compete for visibility and market share globally (Chan, 2004). In response to this trend, China’s push to foster bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other nations’ HEIs has quickened during the past decade. By 2020, there were a total of 890 Sino-foreign cooperation projects at the undergraduate level in China, spanning 28 provinces and involving 440 higher education institutions from 35 countries and regions.

However, being undeveloped users of the English language, HEIs in China have to learn how to differentiate themselves so that they gain market share and relevance. This is particularly urgent for emerging institutions (Chan, 2004). As a consequence, this study examines the underdeveloped western region in China to see if NBUIs there can mitigate the current shortfalls in English proficiency by enhancing IC within a non-native, English-speaking academic system.

While the existing body of research indicates that both IC and EP play significant roles in IHE, evidence is developed to confirm that successful international connections can guarantee better EP, and vice versa. As such, this paper aims to find out whether, firstly, there is a positive interaction between IC and EP; and, secondly, IHE can be improved through a synergistic approach. Accordingly, the following research questions have been devised to achieve the objectives:

1. Does IC influence EP?
2. Does the enhanced EP help IC?
3. How do both these domains help IHE in China where English is the English as Foreign Language (EFL)?

Prior to the discussion of the research methodology, the next section will concentrate on a review of the relevant literature. This is followed by reporting the findings and discussion, and, lastly, the conclusion.
2. Literature review
This section initially discusses the evolving definition of IHE. Prior to delineating the English language’s dominant position in IHE, a detailed explanation is provided regarding the role of IC in IHE.

2.1 The evolving definition of IHE
Since internationalization of the education sector gathered pace in the 1980s (Knight, 2004), four main models have been developed to define the concept of IHE. They are the activity-oriented model (Arum and van de Water, 1992), ongoing-endeavor model to infuse and integrate international elements into HEIs (Knight, 1993), consequence-oriented model of diverse stakeholders’ coordination (Van der Wende, 1997) and the process-oriented model which seeks to infuse international, intercultural and global dimensions into all aspects of a university (Soderqvist, 2002; Knight, 2003). A widely accepted definition of IHE, Knight’s (2004) work serves as the basis of this study, in which IHE is defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural and global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of a post-secondary education” (p. 11).

2.2 The role of IC in HE
IC is experiencing a significant surge (Sutton and Brandenburg, 2022) in recent times. Though such links were not even listed as the best advantages of internationalization by the International Association of Universities in the 2005 global survey (Knight, 2006), they were nonetheless identified as the most significant ones by Marinoni (2019). It was defined by Sutton and Brandenburg (2022, p. 204) as:

> official linkages between an institution of higher education and one or more other institutions/organizations, located in different nations or spanning national boundaries in other ways, and working together to pursue mutually defined goals.

The advantages of IC can be observed both institutionally and individually. From an institutional perspective, such international connections can aid an institution to develop its global profile (Girdzijauskaité and Radzevičienė, 2013); overcome resource shortages and financial or budgetary constraints (Munusamy and Hashim, 2020); facilitate knowledge sharing, technology transfer and material exchange (Girdzijauskaitė et al., 2018); as well as get access to global expertise and benchmarks (Hénard et al., 2012).

From an individual perspective, it enhances the pedagogical and scholarly aptitude of faculty staff members (Orosz and Crăciun, 2019; Sutton and Brandenburg, 2022), while also enabling their professional development (Rumbley and Altbach, 2016). This seems to imply that IC yields greater benefits for institutions than for individuals. However, it is people who work together to advance these links, not institutions (Chan, 2004). Studies have shown that faculty members are the key personnel who are promoting international projects (Childress, 2010). Thus, university academics’ active engagement in cross-border collaboration is pivotal not only for their personal and professional achievements but also for the success of IHE.

2.3 English supremacy in internationalization discourse
The overwhelming role of English as ELF in the global academic system determines its supreme position in international communication discourse. Universities in the economically advanced countries, even in countries where English is not the language of instruction, anticipate their international academic interactions will be delivered in English (Altbach, 2013). As such, joint research and the delivery of international programs, curriculum development, even the assessment of the quality and value of scholars in HEIs, including...
assessment of the global ranking systems, must be conducted in English (Altbach, 2007; Altbach and Knight, 2007).

The remarkable proliferation of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses in China is well-documented: a total of 88,289 bilinguals (English and Chinese) or full-English courses have been offered in Chinese HEIs (MOE, 2021). Academics in non-English-speaking nations are significantly disadvantaged by these factors, not only due to language proficiency challenges but also because the majority of methodology and peer-review evaluators reside within the Anglosphere.

A more significant drawback arises from the increased risk of global homogenization of knowledge due to English’s commanding position and its influence on prevailing trends in world research and scholarship, which creates a potent mix of forces that contributes to a decline in subject and method diversity (Altbach, 2007). The contention posited herein is that the presence of IC is both inevitable and generally advantageous. Yet, how to counteract the linguistic disadvantage in international partnership while ameliorating homogenization of the global academic system warrants additional debate.

2.4 Internationalization in the era of virtualization: positive or negative arbitration

The landscape of IHE has been undergoing a major transformation propelled by the ongoing process of digitalization, IT and a whole range of computer-based systems, with the recent Covid-19 pandemic acting as a powerful accelerant of virtual forms of internationalization (Bruhn-Zass, 2023). This monumental shift has propelled the concept of virtual internationalization (VI) to prominence as a systematic framework, meaning that the multifaceted influence of digitalization and information and communication technology (ICT) on IHE (Bruhn, 2020), needs to be better understood.

The pandemic-induced surge in online teaching and learning (Altbach and de Wit, 2020) not only validated online education’s viability but prompted a reevaluation of its positive IHE implications. These benefits exceed physical classroom replication, covering collaboration, regulatory navigation (e.g., immigration policies), nurturing joint programs, attracting global expertise, virtual mobility and democratizing learning access and processes (Hénard et al., 2012). Bruhn-Zass (2023) expands on this theme, noting ICT’s role in enhancing IC through digital communication, intra-institutional collaboration, expanded education access and capacity development.

However, the great changes in education and its international character wrought by digitalization do not come without its skeptics. Challenges loom, such as uneven or inequitable access to educational technologies (Rumbley et al., 2022), increased anxiety (Al-Ansi, 2021) and limited literacy in using new and rapidly changing applications. Helm and Guth (2022) introduce an additional dimension to the discourse, raising concerns about the potential reinforcement of English as the dominant language for global communication, potentially marginalizing other languages and knowledge systems. Others concern the possible impediments to efficient technology use due to “political and cultural constraints within a specific society,” and the profit-driven use of online technology would limit its capacity in delivering sustainable HE (Alam and Parvin, 2021; Alam, 2022).

The ongoing debates surrounding online education notwithstanding, it is evident that a widespread return to traditional teaching methods is improbable (Rumbley et al., 2022). Yet, one of the repercussions of the pandemic may be a reassessment of how VI can facilitate a more comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable IHE.

3. Research context

As an important tool for the construction of Chinese higher education, institutional mergers are not a new phenomenon in China. Nationwide mergers have been conducted since 1990,
and have undergone three historical reforms; however, the majority (60%) of these mergers occurred between 1999 and 2006 (Cai and Yang, 2015). During this period, specialized single-discipline universities in the same city merged to establish comprehensive and larger institutions, to use as much of their capacity as possible to accommodate more students and sharing of resources and assets (Ngok and Guo, 2008). The term “NBUIs” then emerged to denote institutions that have been established as undergraduate institutions in China since 1999, with the approval of the Ministry of Education through institutional merger, upgrading and transformation. By 2015, a total of 678 NBUIs had been established in China, representing 55.6% of the overall count of 1,219 undergraduate institutes (HETEC of MOE, 2015).

However, this remarkable reform was not bereft of challenges, especially when it came to the internationalization pursuits of these NBUIs. A confluence of factors, including the relatively limited availability of education resources, for instance language proficiency, global partnerships and the development of internationally oriented curricula, and the relatively brief history of venturing into internationalization put most NBUIs at a discernible disadvantage in their efforts to internationalize themselves.

4. Research design
This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the potential mutual influence between IC and EP, as well as their respective roles in IHE. After outlining the research design, we discuss our sampling strategy before delving into data collection and analysis.

4.1 Method
This study aimed to deeply understand the interplay between IC and EP, and their combined impact on IHE. Given this complex nature, a qualitative approach, aligned with the research goals (Creswell, 2012), proves fitting. The study focuses on exploring the diverse variations within China’s NBUIs regarding IC and EP, diverging from assessing the extent of diversity based on the quantitative method (Kumar, 2011).

Bell (2010) asserts that hypotheses often explain relationship patterns, whether positive, negative or causal. However, due to the nature of the research questions, none lend themselves to null or alternative hypotheses (Alam, 2023). Hence, a qualitative approach best suits this study, making possible a better comprehensive exploration unconstrained by hypothesis testing. To answer the research questions, a comparative study was conducted between two NBUIs in the western region of China: H University (HU) and B University (BU).

Both institutions were public universities established after 1999 through institutional mergers and upgrades. Prior to their merger into comprehensive universities, HU exclusively focused on engineering education, while BU was solely dedicated to teachers’ college education. Although both universities are in the same province, HU is located in the capital, whereas BU is situated in a less well-known city. Tools were hence created through an individualistic approach (Table 1).

4.2 Sampling and coding
To determine the appropriate sample size for secondary data, the researcher conducted a thorough review of HU’s and BU’s data from 2015 to 2019, through personal communication with the international offices of both universities. The data were collected in 2023; however, China’s post-COVID-19 outbreak isolation policies and suspension of outbound international activities hindered new IC development at both institutions. Consequently, data beyond 2020 were excluded. The sample specifically includes faculty members and administrators of two institutions who have worked or studied in their overseas partner institutions.
Subsequently, 159 and 336 faculty members were sent abroad, respectively, by the two institutions during this period. Considering the outflow or disconnection of some individuals over such a long period, this study used the minimum R-square method (Kock and Hadaya, 2018) to determine the sample size, in which 33 is considered the minimum required. Based on the nearly 1:2 population ratio of academics and administrative staff with international experience at HU and BU, the sample size was set as 33:66. This sample was solely utilized for assessing the English proficiency of faculty members, with the aim of establishing a connection between IC and EP.

Academics and administrators were sampled for interviews to generate the primary data. Since the directors of Departments of International Affairs, Human Resources, Development and Planning, and Finance are considered the most influential personnel for internationalization management, they were interviewed at both universities to gather data on international policies and strategies. They were coded respectively as Had and Bad, with numbers added as 1 to 4.

We intentionally selected two representatives from each field among arts, science, engineering and business at BU. Since the proportion of people with international experience was almost twice as high at HU compared to BU, we selected four respondents from each of the four fields at HU (Table 2). The assigned codes for academics in both institutions are Hac and Bac, ranging from 1 to 16. This is due to the fact that there is a total of 16 academic samples available for interviews at HU, while there are only 8 available at BU.

### 4.3 Secondary data collection and analysis

The secondary data were initially used to examine the conditions of IC at two institutions. IC primarily resides in inter-university formal agreements or MOUs. With the permission of the Departments of International Affairs at both institutions, these agreements were collected and reviewed to analyze IC differences. We gathered and compared data on the number and regional distribution of agreements, as well as the international experience of academics and staff. Next, we correlated these data with the EP levels of academics and staff to explore the potential interaction between IC and EP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Primary tool(s)</th>
<th>Auxiliary tool(s)</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does IC influence EP?</td>
<td>Document reviews, FGI</td>
<td>Interviews; focus group interview (FGI)</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the enhanced EP help IC?</td>
<td>Document reviews, EF SET reports</td>
<td>Literature review, explanation derived from the findings and discussions of preceding research questions</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do these both domain help IHE in China where English as EFL?</td>
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</tbody>
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**Source(s):** Authors’ own creation

### Table 1. Data collection tools for individual RQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Administrator number</th>
<th>Academics in arts</th>
<th>Academics in science</th>
<th>Academics in engineer</th>
<th>Academics in business</th>
<th>Total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HU</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BU</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source(s):** Authors’ own creation
In this regard, the EF Standard English Test (EF SET) was adopted to test the English levels of the participants to determine how IC can influence their EP and later their ability to engage in IC. The EF SET is a standardized online test that objectively assesses reading and listening skills, providing a categorization of test takers’ abilities into one of three levels (see Table 3) as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Based on the aforementioned sampling analysis, 66 and 33 academics and staff from HU and BU, respectively, took this test. The scores were then compared with the disparities in IC between the two universities to see whether IC and EP have a positive association. The differences in IC and EP were also related to the rankings in the Provincial Institutional Internationalization Evaluation (PIIE) to examine whether they can positively bolster IHE.

4.4 Primary data collection and analysis
To generate primary data, both semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews (FGIs) were used with administrators and academicians. While the former was employed to gain senior leaders’ perspectives of how IC, EP and IHE shape each other, the latter was conducted among the academic staff who had taken the EF SET before, to see whether the enhanced IC has positively influenced their EP based on their perspectives. To achieve this, the research process started with FGIs to collect academic opinions or perspectives, forming the basis for semi-structured interviews with senior officers. This sequential strategy aimed to ensure the valuable insights from FGIs were explored further during interviews with senior leaders.

Researchers conducted six FGIs: two at BU and four at HU. Each group had four participants and lasted 50–70 min. All FGIs participants were EF SET test-takers recommended by the Department of International Affairs directors. Subsequent interviews involved eight directors from departments at both institutions, including International Affairs, Human Resources, Development and Planning, and Finance, lasting 30–60 min each. The second round of interviews was also carried out to further elicit information from respondents.

With the participants’ permission, the data collected from both the FGIs and interviews were meticulously recorded and transcribed. To facilitate the process of analysis, the data underwent a coding procedure, whereby segments of text were systematically labeled with codes that captured their essence (Creswell, 2012). This coding transformed raw data into manageable units, facilitating subsequent thematic analysis. For enhanced analysis, the software “NVivo” served to organize and manage data systematically. As analysis proceeded, overarching themes emerged, revealing the interplay between IC and EP. The subsequent identification and interpretation of these themes form the foundation of the findings presented in this study, contributing to a deeper understanding of the topic at hand.

4.5 Triangulation and confidentiality
The triangulation carried out in this study involved a combined method of data collection including document reviews and interviews. While the main findings were derived from document analysis, respondents’ perspectives were also gathered to ensure consistency.
between the two types of data. To further enhance the triangulation of data collection, both semi-structured interviews and FGIs were conducted. An interview protocol and an informed consent document explaining the goals, procedures and confidentiality issues were devised before the formal interviews commenced. Permission was obtained before each interview was recorded. Relevant codes were then assigned to participants to protect their anonymity and confidentiality of their statements.

5. Findings and discussion
We initially examined the correlation between IC and EP prior to delving into how both domains impact IHE. Subsequently discussed are the possible reasons resulting in their discrepancy in internationalization between the two institutions.

5.1 The relationship between IC and EP: comparative analysis of IC
Three subdomains were utilized for the analysis of IC: the quantity of agreements and MOUs, regional distribution of global partners and overseas experience of academics and staff. Both the total number and respective numbers of agreements and MOUs are important indicators for assessing IC. As of 2019, HU and BU have established partnerships with a total of 75 and 26 overseas institutions, respectively, in this five-year period, encompassing both agreements and MOUs.

While MOUs generally provide a broad framework of cooperation, agreements often involve more concrete and detailed collaboration, such as purposes, implementing procedures, mutual rights and obligations, financial matters. Figure 1 shows that HU has a higher ratio of agreements, whereas MOUs cover a larger proportion at BU. For example, 57.33% and 23.08% of HU and BU agreements had been signed, while MOUs share, respectively, 42.67% and 76.92% at HU and BU.

Regarding regional distribution, HU and BU have established partnerships with 18 nations across all five continents and 14 nations in four continents, respectively. Though the difference in the number of collaborating regions and countries is not significant, the two universities exhibit distinct regional tendencies. While HU demonstrates a strong preference for collaborating with institutions in developed countries with a total ratio of 75% in Europe, America and Oceania, BU tends to prioritize HEIs in Asian developing nations (Figure 2).

HU also has an advantage in continents coverage since BU has not yet established any connections with African institutions. As explained by Had 3, their inclination toward developed nations is driven by the pursuit of awarding doctorates, necessitating the

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1.** The number of agreements and MOUs at HU and BU

**Source(s):** Authors’ own creation
incorporation of more advanced education resources from Western economies to secure a competitive edge in obtaining doctorates. Conversely, Bad 1 states,

Our internationalization was primarily driven by the Belt and Road Initiative, which emphasizes cooperation with developing countries. Given BU’s location at the gateway to South Asia, our strategic focus on internationalization is centred on forging partnerships with Asian nations.

Two subdomains serve to analyze international mobility of faculty and staff members, including the number of those who are dispatched, and destinations. During this period, 336 and 159 faculty staff were sent by HU and BU, respectively, to their global partners. Among these individuals, a total of 72.92% individuals from HU opted for Europe, America and Oceania as their preferred destinations (Figure 3). On the other hand, although more than half of individuals share the same destination preference, a relatively higher percentage (31.45%) selected Asia as their visiting region. This finding is largely consistent with HU’s and BU’s strategic cooperative regions. The issue is further examined with the EF sets results.

Respectively, 33 and 66 academics and administrative staff from BU and HU participated in the EF SET tests. The majority who took part from both institutions demonstrated an intermediate level of proficiency, with the same ratio of 66.67% (Figure 4). However, HU’s participants had more at the advanced level and less at the beginner level compared to BU’s corresponding levels. Consequently, the average scores of HU’s faculty and staff members amount to 78.47, which exceeds the average scores of their counterparts by 8.71 points.
5.2 The relationship between IC and EP

The analysis suggests that HU displays an overall superior level in IC. This disparity is congruent with their relevant personnel’s EF SET higher scores, implying that institutions’ IC plays a positive role in their individuals’ EP, a finding supported by nearly all academics and administrators across both institutions. Most administrators at the two universities acknowledge that as their IC expands, an increasing number of personnel are being dispatched to global partners, which greatly enhances the overall level of their expertise and skills in English.

Apart from this, more than 70% of participants indicated a strong link between the improvement of EP and the duration and location of their stay abroad. After a period of time spent abroad, Hac 3, 8, 9, 10 and 12, and Bac 1, 2 and 7 demonstrated significant improvement in their EP. They further emphasize that the longer they stayed overseas, the better they progressed. However, some respondents reported that their EP had not made any advance while they stayed in non-English-speaking countries such as Japan and Laos. For example, Bac 3 had studied in Japan for 6 years for his doctoral degree, but his EF SET scores were the lowest in the two groups of EF SET testers.

This suggests that EP of personnel can only be improved once the collaborations were conducted with an English-speaking partner. However, when inquiring whether their enhanced EP has contributed to the improvement of their institution’s IC, there were divergent opinions among respondents from both universities. While all administrators from the two institutions unanimously acknowledged that the improved EP had helped them expand and deepen their IC, some academics held different views. On the academic side, there were dissenting voices regarding this matter. While the majority of academics reported that their enhanced EP encouraged deeper collaboration with international partners, a minority expressed frustration at being unable to communicate effectively with administrative personnel both domestically and abroad. Subsequently, no effort was made to improve mutual cooperation.

5.3 The weights of IC, EP on IHE

The Provincial Department of Education (PDE) conducts an annual evaluation of the 27 provincial HEIs. The ranking determines the amount of funding granted by PDE, which includes a 25-point provincial institutional internationalization evaluation (PIIE). During this period, HU had maintained a relative comparative advantage and consistently outperformed BU in the annual PIIE (Figure 5).
According to both Had1 and Bad1, the annual PIIE includes six indicators, specifically the proportions of: international students and faculty staff; Chinese students and faculty members studying or working abroad; number of institutional cooperation programs; and the extent of Sino-foreign cooperation in education. The last two indicators are two different forms of IC. While institutional cooperation programs refer to collaboration through implementation of the agreements or MOUs signed with overseas partners, Sino-foreign cooperative education refers to education activities conducted in China by Chinese and foreign HEIs, with Chinese citizens as the main target students (MOE, 2004).

The latter is an advanced type of IC that necessitates the integration of four education components from foreign institutions, with each component constituting no less than one-third: imported foreign courses and core specialized courses, instructors of all courses and core courses. Though the two indicators cover only 5 points, the significance extends beyond its one-fifth weight in PIIE, since it has the potential to drive progress in the other three indicators, particularly with regard to international faculty teaching staff members’ mobility.

According to the Communist Party of China Central Committee and State Council and State Council (2017), the functions of HEIs include international exchange and cooperation, talent cultivation, scientific research, social services, and cultural inheritance and innovation. In this era of increasing globalization and the knowledge economy, none of these five missions of universities can make any real progress without IC. Therefore, in a broader sense, IC serves as the strongest propeller for IHE. Similarly, the positive impact of the enhanced EP on IHE has been recognized by the majority of respondents. The remark made by Hac15 provides strong evidence for this:

The improved English can encourage ourselves to bridge our own university and the overseas educational institutions we visited, thus expand the breadth and depth of the cooperation. Besides, our fluent English and overseas experience can benefit our students in many fields, such as extending their global visions, utilizing advanced foreign textbooks, course models, teaching methods, etc.

In summary, EP acts as internationalization’s common language, greatly influencing diverse stakeholders and elements. Institutionally, EP shapes global standings through rankings highlighting English-medium publications, international students and faculty members’ presence. Academically, EP is vital for scholarly activities, accessing global resources and prestigious journal or monograph publications. Strong English programs attract more international students, while for practitioners, EP empowers by facilitating IC and ensuring its success. Hence, universities should strive to enhance the EP of their faculty teaching and administrative staff to ensure the success of both IC and IHE.
5.4 Reasons for emitting the differences in internationalization of two institutions

Based on the respondents’ views, three factors contribute to the two universities’ differences in internationalization. Firstly, the availability of financial/budgetary resources can have a significant impact on a university’s ability to invest in internationalization strategies and projects. Universities with larger budgets and endowments may be better equipped to establish international partnerships, fund exchange programs and attract international faculty researchers, teachers or lecturers and students.

After examining the annual budgets of HU and BU, it has been observed that the former’s budget surpassed that of the latter in all years. For instance, in 2023, HU’s total budget amounts to RMB 1.79 billion (HU, 2023), which is a staggering RMB1 billion higher than BU’s budget in the same year (BU, 2023). It can also be inferred from the statements of Had 4 and Bad 4 that HU’s internationalization budgets were higher than BU’s for all five years. Had 1 states:

Our university places great emphasis on promoting internationalization. Each year, the university allocates RMB 1 million to support faculty in their endeavours to work or study abroad. Additionally, preference is given to academics with overseas experience when it comes to their title promotion.

However, no policy or funding support had been reported by BU’s respondents. The second reason noted by virtually all respondents is geographical location. They contend the location of universities can dictate their competitiveness in IHE. Universities situated in major metropolitan regions and having established reputations in specific fields may have a natural advantage in attracting international talents and forming global partnerships. On the other hand, universities situated in remote or less well-known places may face challenges in attracting international recognition and resources. The example provided by Bad 1 serves as an illustration here:

Since 2019, we have been searching for a native English speaker to deliver oral English courses. However, our attempts have repeatedly failed due to either the distance of our university or the salary claimed. As a result, we don’t have English native speakers yet. Besides, though we have 26 international partners, more than half of them are from Asia, and others are scattered sporadically in Europe, America and Oceania.

Institutional priorities and leadership rank third among the most frequently cited reasons for discrepancies in internationalization efforts. The priorities and strategic vision of university leadership play a crucial role in determining the extent and success of internationalization. Had 3’s observation may well explain this:

Our university has always been in the pursuit of awarding doctoral degrees for two decades. However, as a comprehensive provincial-level university, there still exists certain gaps, such as the student-teacher ratio, full-time teacher-doctor ratio and other indicators that need to be met for awarding doctorates. Since IC has been proven to be effective in compensating for the insufficient resources and help us to succeed in doctorate awarding competition, our leadership places a strong emphasis on internationalization.

Similarly, Bad 1 claimed leadership’s priority on internationalization:

Our leadership has been actively seeking global partners since 2017, proposing to establish an innovative, applied, and international school-running model. However, due to the disconnect between leadership’s priority and practical financial and policy support in international initiatives, the process of our internationalization is proceeding slowly and lags behind many other provincial universities.

The findings and discussion strongly suggest that IC does positively help an institution’s personnel’s EP as well as its overall internationalization, and EP can also actively influence institutional internationalization. However, it is not readily apparent whether enhanced EP
can lead to an expansion in IC. Additionally, the discrepancy in internationalization between two institutions can be attributed to three factors, namely financial resources or backing, geographical location and leadership’s priorities.

6. Conclusions and further implications
The major highlight of the key findings in this study is that IC plays a significant role in internationalization efforts, with English serving as a critical medium. However, the purposes and the interests of this connection differ among stakeholders. As an underprivileged phenomenon, NBUIs should take caution not to fall into the traps that are explained in more detail below.

The scores of IC in PIIE affect the financial grants of involved institutions. Hence, NBUIs must avoid falling into the dual traps of number-crunching and income-generation instruments, solely pursuing the quantity of IC as an attempt to obtain financial grants, and neglecting the real essence of IC. As a result, they may find themselves in an awkward situation where they are unable to effectively support a significant number of agreements, leading to many becoming inactive and primarily serving as paper-based arrangements (Knight, 2004).

Altbach and Knight (2007) argue that the pursuit of financial gain is a primary driver for all internationalization initiatives in the for-profit sector. Thus, NBUIs should be cautious when engaging in partnerships with global entities aiming to gain profits from IC. In addition to the aforementioned remark, it is worth noting that both HU and BU have only engaged in bilateral collaborations, and as yet lack multilevel partnerships.

NBUIs are usually comprehensive universities that participate in international activities across all three missions (teaching, research and service). As Hudzik (2016) notes, given the impossibility of any single partnership meeting all needs, the establishment of global institutional networks may become exceedingly necessary. However, studies such as Hénard et al. (2012) and Rumbley et al. (2012) suggest many networks seek to attract prestigious HEIs and well-resourced members.

As a consequence, fledgling HE systems or institutions with limited resources may lack the financial ability or quality standards required for membership in an established network. Thus, the emerging institutions in China, like HU and BU may, firstly, consider to adjust their IC strategies; and, secondly, change their cooperative partners from the Western economies to countries along the Belt and Road that are aligned with China’s expansionist economic policy.

In doing so, they may join some developing countries’ networks, such as the China-ASEAN International Education Development Alliance and Alliance of Universities of the Silk Road, utilizing the power of these networks to open international markets. Yet, how to join these networks and utilize their powers to strengthen and develop NBUIs while overcoming barriers such as the level of proficiency in English, deserve to be the subjects of future research.

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Corresponding author
Gazi Mahabubul Alam can be contacted at: gazimalamb@yahoo.com

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