

Weaving Belt and Road Initiative into Transnational Higher Education Development in Shaanxi, China

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Abstract

Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) in Shaanxi Province faces challenges such as limited engagement with Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries, disciplinary imbalances, and policy ambiguities, which hinder its effectiveness. This paper aims to examine TNHE's current status of Shaanxi Province and propose strategies for better alignment with national and regional educational goals under the BRI framework. Using a qualitative approach, it analyses policy documents and secondary data from the Ministry of Education's TNHE supervision platform, guided by the Policy-Implementation-Outcome (PIO) framework. Findings indicate that TNHE partnerships in Shaanxi are primarily with Western countries, with limited collaboration in BRI regions. Additionally, engineering disciplines dominate TNHE programmes, restricting their contribution to regional economic needs. Policy gaps, resource constraints, and a lack of international faculty further challenge TNHE development. Strengthening partnerships with BRI countries, expanding disciplinary diversity, and optimising policy implementation are crucial for enhancing TNHE's role in supporting regional and national development.

Keywords: Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Internationalisation of Higher Education, Shaanxi Province

Introduction

In 2013, China established the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which brings together international connectivity and collaboration in the economic and education fields of the international economy and political system (Visvizi et al., 2019). The BRI is designed to stimulate economic development across a vast region, covering over 140 countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Key elements of the initiative include infrastructure development, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges, reflecting its multidimensional focus on global connectivity and collaboration (Huang, 2016). The initiative emphasises sustainable growth and comprehensive regional cooperation, seeking to

strengthen partnerships not only through physical infrastructure but also through cultural and educational exchanges (Khan et al., 2018).

Education is regarded as a fundamental pillar for bridging cultural gaps, sharing knowledge, and fostering globally minded talent. Within the framework of BRI, educational collaboration has become a central element, aimed at strengthening transnational partnerships and facilitating cross-border exchanges in education (Peters & Green, 2021). By focusing on educational exchanges, joint programmes, and academic partnerships, the BRI plays a pivotal role in fostering closer ties between China and the participating countries (Yuniarto, 2019). This integration of educational collaboration not only meets current development demands but also lays the foundation for long-term cooperation among countries, ensuring sustained collaboration for years to come (Bai, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) refers to educational systems, programmes, and institutions that cross national boundaries, often involving partnerships or collaborations between universities or academic institutions in different countries (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). This model enables students to gain access to foreign education without leaving their home countries, thus fostering international knowledge exchange and creating global educational networks (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2013). As higher education institutions and programmes grow in number, they act as platforms for cultivating skilled talent and boosting innovation, which are key elements for the success of the BRI. Under the framework of BRI, TNHE models in various regions have demonstrated a trend towards diversified development. Among these, Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, stand out for their strong governmental policy support and flexibility in fostering TNHE initiatives. TNHE serves as a bridge for BRI countries, offering opportunities for students, researchers, and educational institutions to collaborate and share knowledge across borders, thus aligning with the broader BRI objectives of enhancing regional and global cooperation.

Chinese TNHE significantly contributes to the BRI by importing foreign educational resources, fostering global academic environments, and promoting diplomatic relations through educational collaboration. The development of educational partnerships between Chinese institutions and universities in countries along the BRI has created new opportunities for cross-border research, joint academic programmes, and knowledge exchange, which are crucial to the success of the BRI. Indirectly, frequent educational exchanges have helped to strengthen diplomatic relations between China and countries along the BRI, promoting cultural understanding and mutual respect among participating countries, as well as trust and cooperation in the political and economic spheres.

As the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, Shaanxi Province holds significant strategic importance in the BRI framework. With its deep cultural heritage, unique geographical location, and growing role in China's Western development strategy, Shaanxi is an important hub for international cooperation. The province's higher education sector supported by prominent "Double First-Class" universities, plays a key role in advancing international academic cooperation and meeting the diverse educational needs of BRI countries. However, despite its significance at the national level, the development of TNHE in Shaanxi still faces many challenges, including insufficient cooperation with countries along the BRI, lack of diversity in disciplinary layout, and weak alignment with local industrial needs (Zhang, 2023).

Motivated by the pressing need to bridge this gap between Shaanxi's strategic potential and its current state of educational cooperation, this study aims to systematically examine how regional policies and institutional practices can be aligned with BRI objectives, making Shaanxi a crucial case for understanding regional integration within China's broader internationalisation efforts.

This paper contributes uniquely by addressing both theoretical and practical gaps in the current understanding of TNHE within the context of China's BRI. While previous studies primarily focused on policy analysis or isolated cases, this paper adopts a more integrative approach, systematically exploring how regional policies and institutional practices align or diverge under BRI. This paper also provides targeted strategies that could help policymakers and educational administrators optimise TNHE initiatives, thus significantly enhancing the internationalisation capacity of regional higher education institutions in Shaanxi Province.

The research questions of this paper are as follows: under the framework of the BRI: What is the current status of TNHE in Shaanxi Province? What are the key challenges and constraints in the current development process? How can policies, resources, and disciplinary structures be optimised to enhance the quality and effectiveness of TNHE in Shaanxi Province?

The Regional Approach in China's TNHE Development

Regionalism in higher education refers to the process of building closer collaboration among educational actors and systems within a designated region (Knight, 2016). This trend is linked to the renewal of regional cooperation and the international competition for knowledge-based economies (Chou & Ravinet, 2015). In Southeast Asia, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a pivotal role in promoting regionalism in higher education, positioning it as a strategic response to globalisation and a means of enhancing the region's competitive advantage (Dang, 2017). The ASEAN approach to regionalism involves task-specific initiatives focusing on quality assurance, harmonization, and mobility, facilitated by organizations like ASEAN+3 and AUN (Symaco & Tee, 2019).

Regionalism provides a valuable lens for examining TNHE development in China, particularly with ASEAN countries (Welch, 2018). According to the 2023 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin, there are 3,074 higher education institutions in China. The total number of students enrolled in all forms of higher education is 47,631,900, and there are 2,074,900 full-time teachers in higher education (MOE, 2024). The size and scale are too big for a new venture to enter China for TNHE, regionalism will support the new TNHE venture to be concentrated in strategy and approach.

The regional distribution of TNHE in China is characterised by significant imbalances. TNHE partnerships are concentrated in economically developed regions, particularly in East China, with fewer opportunities in Central and West China (Hou et al., 2014; Si & Lim, 2023)(See Figure 1).



Figure 1 Distribution of the number of TNHE institutions and programmes by province

Data and Methods

This paper traces regional approaches to developing TNHE via BRI, with a focus on Shaanxi Province. The paper employs a qualitative research design that uses policy document analysis and secondary data review to explore past and present development to point out a comprehensive view of the TNHE scene in Shaanxi Province within the framework of the BRI. National and provincial policy documents related to TNHE and BRI were collected and analysed. Additionally, secondary data from the Ministry of Education's TNHE supervision platform were examined. The data includes details on the specifics of TNHE in Shaanxi Province.

The study employs the "Policy-Implementation-Outcome" (PIO) framework to guide the analysis, examining three core areas: the goals of TNHE policies, how these policies are implemented, and the results they have achieved in terms of international cooperation and local development.

This analysis examines important policy documents at the national and provincial levels, focusing on the design intentions of these policies and how they contribute to the optimisation of TNHE while also identifying possible issues, such as unclear regulations or insufficient emphasis on cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road. In addition, the specific situation of TNHE in Shaanxi Province is analysed through data provided by the Ministry of Education's platform for TNHE supervision, which helps to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of Shaanxi Province. By focusing on policy analysis and regional comparisons, this paper proposes strategies for Shaanxi Province to enhance the effectiveness and prominence of its TNHE under the BRI.

Key Findings

Current Status

Shaanxi Province's Policy Initiatives and Strategic Efforts in Advancing TNHE under the BRI

In 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM) jointly issued *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, pointing out that the core areas of cooperation in the construction of the BRI are the "Five Links": namely policy communication, facility connectivity, trade facilitation, financial integration, and people-to-people communication. The BRI highlights international education as a key driver of cultural exchange, talent cultivation, and regional integration (Ge & Ho, 2022).

As part of this national strategy, Shaanxi Province aims to leverage its historical and geographical advantages as the starting point of the Silk Road to develop TNHE. In 2013, Shaanxi Province issued the *Xi'an Declaration for Building the Silk Road Economic Belt*, and in October 2014, it set up the Provincial Leading Group for Promoting the Construction of the Belt and Road with the provincial governor as the leader. In 2016, the provincial party committee and the provincial government issued the *Implementation Programme for Promoting the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (2015-2020) in Shaanxi Province*. In October 2021, the General Office of the Provincial Government issued *Shaanxi Province's 14th Five-Year Plan to Integrate Deeply into the Construction of the "Belt and Road" Pattern and Build an Inland Open Highland*. At the beginning of 2022, Xi'an City officially issued *the Implementation Plan for the Comprehensive Pilot Zone of Belt and Road* as part of its 14th Five-Year Plan.

When Shaanxi's society and economy are integrated into the construction of BRI in all aspects, Shaanxi's higher education sector is also taking active action. The Shaanxi Provincial Department of Education has formulated the *Implementing Opinions of Shaanxi Province on Doing a Good Job of Opening Up Education in the New Era* in combination with the relevant policies of the state, Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Shaanxi Provincial Government signed *the Memorandum of International Co-operation on the One Belt and One Road Education Initiative*, *the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Education in Shaanxi Province* and a series of other related policy documents. The introduction of these documents and policies points the way for Shaanxi Province to leverage its geographical advantages during the implementation of the BRI and to align with the overall BRI strategy.

However, Shaanxi Province's development of TNHE reflects both achievements and limitations. As shown in Figure 2, Shaanxi Province ranks 18th among all provinces and municipalities in terms of the number of TNHE institutions and programmes.

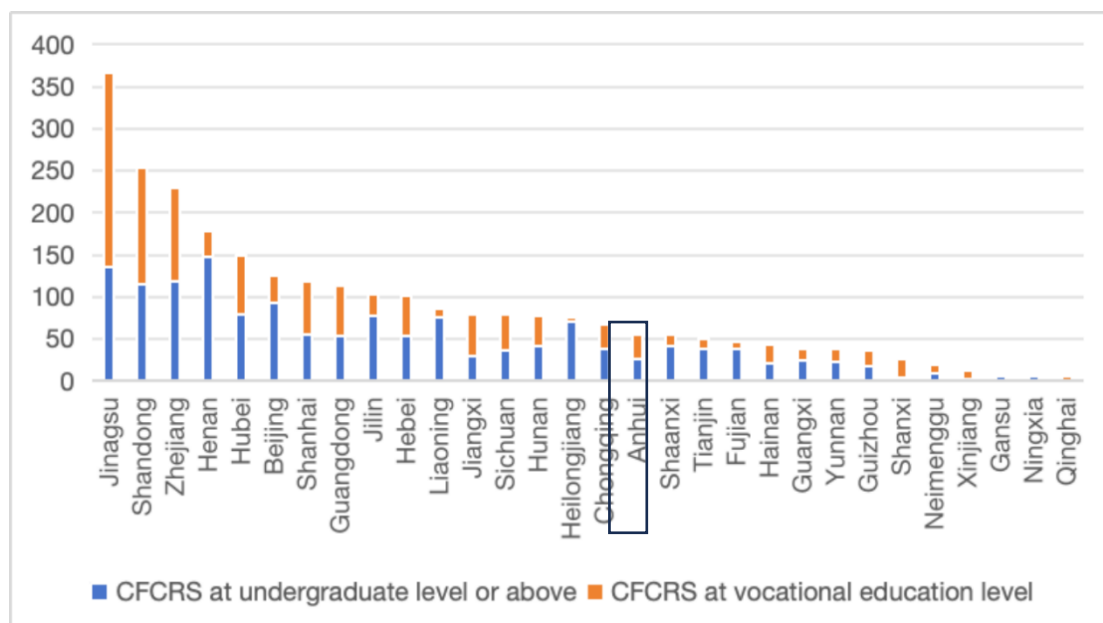


Figure 2 Provincial Number of TNE Institutions and Programmes in China

Limited International Cooperation in TNHE

Out of 111 higher education institutions in Shaanxi, only 31 participate in TNHE, accounting for 27.9% of all institutions. Moreover, most collaborations remain concentrated in Western nations. Data indicate that the largest number of TNHE programmes and institutions are with British universities, which is 10, followed by 8 each with universities in the United States and Australia. In contrast, cooperation with BRI countries remains comparatively limited, accounting for only 12.5% of the 56 TNHE programmes and institutions in Shaanxi Province. These collaborations involve just seven institutions and programmes, spread across Russia, the United Arab Emirates, and Ukraine, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

TNHE institutions and programmes between universities in Shaanxi Province and countries along the Belt and Road Route

No.	Institution/Programme's Name	Chinese Partner Institution	Foreign Partner Institution	Cooperation Country	Type	Level
1	Moscow Institute of Arts at Weinan Normal University	Weinan Normal University	Moscow State Pedagogical University	Russia	Institution	Bachelor
2	Xi'an Technological University Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University Joint Polytechnic Institute	Xi'an Technological University	Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University	Russia	Institution	Bachelor
3	International College of Transportation at Xi'an Railway	Xi'an Railway Vocational &	Petersburg State	Russia	Institution	Diploma

	Vocational & Technical Institute	Technical Institute	Transport University			
4	Samara School at Railway Institute	Transport Shaanxi Railway Institute	Shaanxi Railway Institute	Samara State Transport University	Russia	Institution Diploma
5	Arabic Language Programme with the University of Sharjah	Xi'an International Studies University	Xi'an International Studies University	University of Sharjah	UAE	Programme Bachelor
6	Petroleum Engineering Programme with Lomonosov Northern (Arctic) Federal University	Yulin University	Yulin University	Lomonosov Northern (Arctic) Federal University	Russia	Programme Bachelor
7	Doctoral Programme in Design with National University of Technologies and Design	Kyiv National University of Science & Technology	Kyiv National University of Science & Technology	Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design	Ukraine	Programme Doctorate

As a result, the overall coverage and scale of these partnerships are relatively constrained.

Imbalances in TNHE Outcomes: Concentrated Cooperation and Limited Disciplinary Diversity

The outcomes of TNHE in Shaanxi Province further reflect these imbalances. The cooperation area is too concentrated. Most of the programmes and institutions are in Russia, while the cooperation coverage of other countries along the BRI such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia is narrow, limiting the broad influence of international education. Furthermore, the disciplinary distribution of TNHE programmes, as detailed in Table 2, reveals significant imbalances. Engineering dominates, with 11 out of 16 programmes (68.75%) focusing on traditional areas such as railway transportation, logistics, and petroleum engineering, while emerging disciplines like artificial intelligence, the digital economy, and environmental science remain largely absent. Arts, education, and literature make up a smaller proportion, collectively accounting for only 31.3% of all programmes combined. This lack of diversity limits TNHE's ability to address the multifaceted development needs of BRI countries and local industries.

Table 2

Distribution of Academic Disciplines in TNHE between Universities in Shaanxi Province and Countries Along the Belt and Road

Academic Discipline	Number	Specialisations	Proportion
Engineering	11	Railway Transportation Operations Management	68.75%
		Railway Power Supply Technology	
		Railway Locomotives	
		Railway Vehicles	
		Railway Engineering Technology	
		Railway Logistics Management	
		Railway Signal Automation Control	
		Metallic Materials Engineering	
		Mechanical Design, Manufacturing, and Automation	
		Automation	
		Petroleum Engineering	
Arts	3	Music	18.75%
		Fine Arts	
		Design	
Education	1	Preschool Education	6.25%
Literature	1	Arabic Language	6.25%

Table 2 Distribution of Academic Disciplines in TNHE between Universities in Shaanxi Province and Countries Along the Belt and Road

Low-Level Cooperation and Limited Internationalisation in TNHE

In addition, as shown in Figure 3, the level of cooperation is low. Most of the programmes and institutions are at the diploma and undergraduate levels, with limited collaboration in doctoral and high-end scientific research, weakening the competitiveness of international talent cultivation. At the same time, the internationalisation level of cooperative institutions is limited. Foreign partners are predominantly regional universities, with limited involvement from top universities, affecting the international visibility and resource attraction of TNHE.

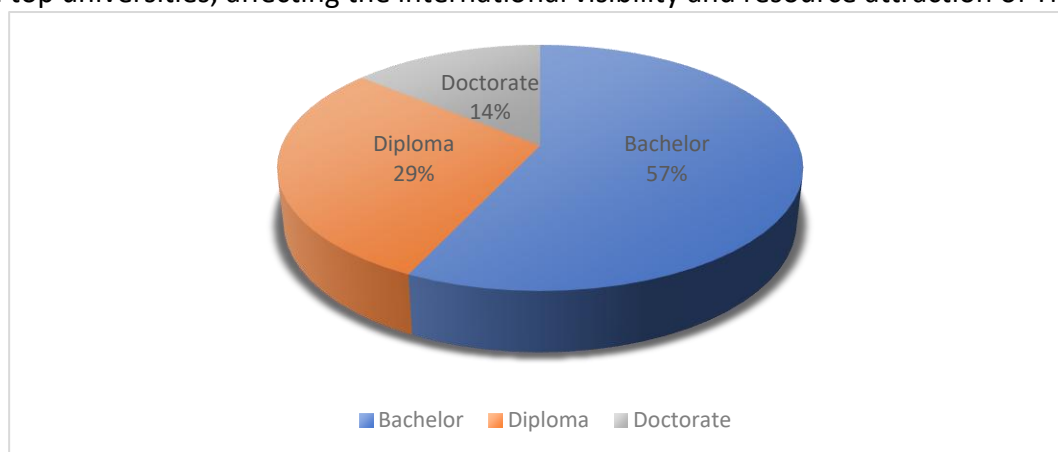


Figure 3 Educational Level Distribution in TNHE Institutions and Programmes

Challenges in Implementation Mechanisms

Ambiguities in Policy Design and Implementation

Existing research indicates that education policies under the BRI framework exhibit certain ambiguities and imperfections at the design and implementation levels, particularly in the generalised guidance provided to local higher education institutions (Gao, 2020; Jia, 2024). They lack specific implementation guidelines for educational cooperation with countries along the BRI route and offer limited and detailed regulations on how local universities can establish practical cooperation pathways and utilise international educational resources (Shi & Li, 2023). This policy gap not only makes it challenging for local universities to plan and implement programmes effectively but also limits their ability to capitalise fully on the opportunities provided by the BRI (Shi & Li, 2023).

Geographical Advantages Underutilised

Although Shaanxi occupies a strategic geographical position at the core of the Asia-Europe Continental Bridge and serves as the starting point of the Silk Road, its location and cultural advantages have not been effectively utilised to establish a competitive advantage in attracting high-quality international education cooperation. Although the BRI offers substantial opportunities for fostering higher education collaboration, several significant challenges persist. These include ambiguous institutional norms and a lack of robust legal frameworks to underpin such partnerships (Jia, 2024).

The current international cooperation efforts of Shaanxi's universities remain predominantly focused on developed countries in Europe and the United States, with relatively limited and low-level collaborations with countries along the BRI (Liu et al., 2024). For example, countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Israel have no established cooperative programmes or institutions with universities in Shaanxi Province. This underscores Shaanxi's underutilisation of its geographical and historical resources to promote the internationalisation of its education sector and establish deeper connections with BRI countries. Addressing these limitations necessitates strategic interventions to overcome systemic barriers and enhance Shaanxi's engagement in higher education collaboration along the BRI route.

Resource Capacity

Universities in Shaanxi, especially those outside of Xi'an, may be constrained by insufficient funding and underdeveloped infrastructure, both of which are critical to supporting and sustaining TNHE programmes. Lack of resources not only limits the ability of universities to expand their educational facilities, but also reduces their competitiveness in international partnerships (Xu et al., 2009; Yencken et al., 2021). These challenges become critical for universities aiming to establish or maintain international partnerships, and without strong infrastructure and adequate financial resources, it is difficult for universities to meet the operational needs of TNHE, such as establishing adequate teaching and learning facilities and technical support systems (Willis, 2003).

Furthermore, funding shortfalls can undermine the overall ability of these institutions to position themselves as competitive players in the global education landscape (Lu et al., 2018). Because the inability to provide competitive compensation packages or work and living environments for international faculty and staff at foreign partner universities is detrimental to the development of TNHEs once when TNHEs are short of funds (Li & Xue, 2021), addressing these resource-related challenges is critical for Shaanxi universities to effectively participate in TNHEs and increase their global visibility.

Faculty Capacity

In addition to resource limitations, faculty capacity is another equally important challenge. Local universities face substantial challenges in attracting and retaining international faculty, a critical component of enhancing global competitiveness and advancing internationalisation efforts (Huang & Kim, 2022). Recruiting and retaining qualified international faculty is particularly difficult, as it involves navigating complex technical aspects such as visa applications, competitive salary offerings, and cultural integration. For universities with constrained resources, these tasks become even more demanding (Lu et al., 2018).

The lack of structured support and professional development opportunities further exacerbates these difficulties. Insufficient mentorship and limited resources to help international faculty integrate into the academic environment create additional barriers. Moreover, local universities also suffer from a shortage of highly qualified faculty, substandard curriculum design, and inadequacies in institutional regulations. These issues are far less pronounced in “double first-class” universities, further widening the gap between elite and local institutions (Hu et al., 2019). Such challenges severely hinder local universities’ ability to compete in the international education arena.

Discipline Mismatch

Research indicates that a balanced approach to discipline offerings is essential to ensure that TNHE programmes effectively contribute to local development (Hu et al., 2019; Huang, 2023). In Shaanxi Province, the disciplinary settings of TNHE institutions and programmes are mainly concentrated in engineering fields, such as mechanical design, automation, and computer science, which account for over 50% of the total. However, there is a noticeable shortage of cooperation programmes in disciplines related to local characteristic industries (e.g. agriculture, cultural tourism, and aerospace). TNHE under the BRI have struggled to meet urgent talent needs in key industries such as infrastructure and energy, due to limitations in discipline coverage. This imbalance further restricts cooperative education’s capacity to contribute to local economic development and address broader regional talent demands (Liu et al., 2024).

A similar issue arises in language cooperation programmes, where small language offerings at Shaanxi universities remain overly homogeneous, with only a few languages such as Arabic being offered. There is a notable absence of small language programmes, such as Hindi and Bengali, which are in high demand by countries along the BRI. This structural imbalance in language programmes further limits the ability of Shaanxi universities to support the BRI and hampers their potential to deepen international cooperation (Ge & Ho, 2022).

Discussion

Shaanxi Province needs to strengthen its strategic planning and develop differentiated policies for various types of colleges and universities to ensure equitable resource distribution and to maximise regional development advantages. Significant differences in resources, development goals, and international cooperation capabilities necessitate targeted policies for “Double First-Class” universities and local undergraduate colleges (Li et al., 2022). For “Double First-Class” universities, priorities should include supporting international research centers and joint doctoral programmes to enhance research performance and global academic networks (Zhang et al., 2022). In contrast, local undergraduate colleges should

receive dedicated funding and subsidies to foster their participation in foundational international initiatives, particularly in language teaching and basic disciplines (Moyo & McKenna, 2021). Additionally, a regional cooperation and resource-sharing platform could be created to promote the synergistic development of faculty, curricula, and international programme resources between “Double First-Class” universities and local colleges.

In addition, strategic policy design should consider the geographic and industrial advantages of Shaanxi Province and align with regional economic development goals. As the starting point of the Silk Road, Shaanxi possesses significant geographic and cultural advantages. Policies should encourage universities to develop international disciplinary cooperation in sectors with strengths such as agriculture, culture, tourism, and aerospace, while also strengthening multilingual educational cooperation with countries along BRI.

Shaanxi Province should prioritise strengthening cooperation with countries along the BRI and deepening educational exchanges and collaborations through various means. Firstly, academic and cultural ties between universities can be enhanced by establishing joint research centers and student exchange programmes (Lee et al., 2024). This approach will not only improve the scientific research capacity of universities but also provide more opportunities to cultivate international talents. Secondly, the complexities of ideological construction in multilingual higher education under the BRI framework generate significant implications for policymakers (Chen et al., 2020). Building on this perspective, Shaanxi Province can develop multilingual TNHE programmes in less commonly taught languages, such as Hindi, Bengali, and Turkish, to align with the linguistic and cultural needs of BRI countries. Such programmes will enhance the cross-cultural communication skills of university students and foster deeper exchanges and collaborations with these countries. By prioritising cooperative relations with BRI countries, Shaanxi universities can solidify their role in international educational cooperation and provide robust support for the opening up and internationalisation of education under the framework of the BRI.

Engaging academic staff in TNHE through interaction and collaboration with international peers is critical to improving teaching quality (Toohey et al., 2017). Universities in Shaanxi Province should prioritise the internationalisation of their academic staff to enhance teaching standards and better align with global educational practices. Incentive policies should be developed to attract more international faculty. For instance, creating a favourable working environment by offering competitive salaries, optimal working conditions, and a more flexible visa application process can help attract high-level educators with international perspectives. Meanwhile, local faculty should receive cross-cultural teaching competence training to improve their global teaching competitiveness (Seeberg & Minick, 2012). Organising exchange programmes and training opportunities for local faculty to internationally renowned universities is essential, such training not only enhances teaching skills but also helps educators adapt to the international education environment, enabling them to create high-quality collaborative programmes with foreign faculty (González-Carriedo & López de Nava, 2017).

By strengthening the two-way approach of introducing international faculty and providing training for local faculty, Shaanxi universities can further enhance the quality of

internationalised teaching. This will provide a stronger foundation for faculty cooperation and internationalisation under the framework of the BRI.

Summary and Conclusion

The development of TNHE in the framework of BRI represents a major opportunity to strengthen international cooperation in education. By adopting the PIO framework, this paper not only deepens the theoretical understanding of the TNHE mechanism but also offers practical guidance to local higher education in addressing localisation challenges in the globalisation context. It discusses the current situation and development challenges of TNHE in Shaanxi Province under the BRI and makes practical contributions at the national, regional, and institutional levels.

At the national level, there is a need to develop more detailed implementation guidelines for BRI education cooperation, strike a balance between cooperation with developed countries and those along the Belt and Road within the broader framework of the national Belt and Road policy, and establish an inter-regional resource-sharing coordination mechanism to strengthen China's role in TNHE, thereby contributing to the broader goals of the BRI.

At the regional level, for Shaanxi Province and similar regions, the paper highlights the importance of leveraging historical and geographical advantages for educational cooperation. It also stresses better alignment between TNHE and regional industrial development, as well as strengthening regional platforms for resource sharing and teacher development. These findings can guide other provinces in formulating TNHE development strategies for their regions.

At the institutional level, Studies of individual institutions suggest that a more systematic and forward-looking approach to programme development and partner selection should be adopted during the internationalisation process. In addition, the international capacity building of teachers should be strengthened to improve their ability in global perspectives, cross-cultural communication skills, and academic impact. These recommendations will help TNHE better define its roles in international education cooperation and build unique disciplinary brands to achieve sustainable development goals.

Future studies should focus on the long-term effects of the proposed strategy to assess its actual effectiveness in improving the quality and international impact of the TNHE in Shaanxi Province. At the same time, through the horizontal comparison with other provinces under the framework of BRI education cooperation, the causes of regional differences and their policy implications can be further discussed. This can provide a reference framework for Shaanxi Province and offer valuable insights into TNHE practices across the country.

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