

## CHINA-THAILAND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE POST COVID-19 ERA: EXPERIENCES AND PROSPECTS

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the International Cooperation in Higher Education (ICHE), bringing virtual learning into play. China and Thailand are the first two countries in the world that reported the COVID-19 cases reflecting the longest attempt to get through the pandemic. The purpose of this study were (1) to investigate the experiences and (2) to examine prospects of China-Thailand ICHE in response to the COVID-19. The study adopted the qualitative approach by interviewing 25 participants and reviewing the related documents. Random purposive sampling and criterion sampling were employed to select 11 Chinese and 14 Thai representatives from the government, university, teachers and students, and entrepreneurs by adopting online and offline semi-structured interviews. Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was used to evaluate the validity of interview questions. The coding technique and desk research was used to analyze data.

The study found three main experiences of the China-Thailand ICHE, including (1.1) transforming for the unplanned plan, (1.2) virtual mobility of students and teachers, and (1.3) seminars for academic and public and six prospects for future cooperation, including (2.1) flexible cooperation framework, (2.2) mutual accountability, (2.3) virtual cooperation, (2.4) quality of education exchange, (2.5) virtual research collaboration, and (2.6) digital infrastructure. Overall, the paper addressed opportunities and challenges for future ICHE. It demonstrated a cooperation mechanism assisting public and business sectors to outreach more innovative and comprehensive cooperation regarding the uncertainty of COVID-19.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Higher Education, China-Thailand Cooperation

### Introduction

International Cooperation in Higher Education (ICHE) is a crucial strategy for any nation to expand knowledge products, maximize the national economic competitiveness, and

strengthen international relationships (Punteney & Wei, 2018; Yang, 2012). The cooperation creates opportunity, at the same time, challenges. Specifically, ICHE allows universities to gain knowledge that they cannot find at home

country; however, it requires time and resource contribution among partners, policymakers, and practitioners (Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2020). Beyond existed challenges, the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted ICHE; many countries were forced to adjust their education activities to the virtual platform. Although some leading institutions have formed policies and strategies responding to COVID-19, some still need support and information to better cope with the disruption.

Since 1978, ICHE between China and Thailand has been promoted after signing the Agreement on Scientific and Technical Cooperation. Many cooperation projects are completed and lead to a longstanding relationship at governmental, institutional, and individual levels. The cooperation includes civil servant and expert exchange, long-term education exchange, scholarship for civil servants, and cooperative research projects. China's Belt and Road Initiative and Thailand 4.0 strategy accelerate the process of China-Thailand ICHE. The effort of the cooperation results in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), mutual agreements, joint projects, and student and teacher exchanges (Zeng et al., 2013).

The main research problem was the challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak that affected China and Thailand ICHE. Jung et al. (2021) explained that higher education institutions inevitably encountered unexpected challenges and continued to roll out key teaching, research, and service functions, which not all institutions

can handle such a difficult and uncontrollable situation. Moja (2021) also elaborated that the transnational activities of the university, teaching and learning activities, international exchange programs, research activities, and academic conferences are interrupted. Some university teachers and students feel demotivated with the uncertainty and virtual classroom by what Jung et al. (2021) called a circumstance that "living with Zoom, learning from webinars" and "you will be informed in due course, stay calm until further notice".

The significance of this study was robust and valuable. The study added on the China-Thailand relationship after the COVID-19 literature. Experiences learned from China-Thailand ICHE can be used as an alternative development direction to improve the policies and practices of potential stakeholders, including government, university, teacher and student, and enterprise.

## Objectives

1. To investigate experiences and actions of the institution, teacher, and student involve in China-Thailand cooperation in higher education in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

2. To examine prospects of international cooperation in higher education under and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

## Literature Review

### What's International Cooperation in Higher Education (ICHE)?

Historically, cooperation is a result of

the neoliberal or free-market ideology rooted in the principle of Rochdale in 1844 and last revised in 1995. The principle is based on the concept of voluntary and open membership concerned with a concept of self-help, equity, and solidarity. The cooperation has been rolled out among various sectors nationally and globally in the form of government-to-government cooperation, bilateral and multilateral agreements, public-private partnerships, and a kind of charity involvement and entrepreneurship.

The concept of ICHE tides to the notion of internationalization in higher education; it has influenced national policy, institutional strategy, and teacher and student activity (Yang, 2012). ICHE is a voluntary mechanism that links at least two institutions to further their educational activity through forms of agreement. Cai (2019) defined ICHE as one of the internationalizing processes that promote academic mobility, students and teachers exchange, joint degree education, and research collaboration across the border. Zeng et al. (2013) pointed out that ICHE not only generates the flow of student mobility but disrupts the current architecture of the higher education system. Besides, the cooperation does not limit its scope to higher education institutions. Puntoney and Wei (2018) argued that it could cooperate with other sectors, such as governmental organizations, civil society, private institutions, enterprise, and industries.

### **China and Thailand ICHE and COVID-19 impacts**

The ICHE is brought to the crossroad surrounded by the COVID-19 outbreak and

uncertainty. In late December 2019, the COVID-19 cases were reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China and widely spread across countries from late January 2020. To prevent and control the pandemic, counties and governments worldwide decided to close their border, restrict international travel, and limit the mobility of people. On 13 January 2020, a COVID-19 case in Thailand, the first recorded outside China, was reported. After 30 January 2020, COVID-19 started to spread within Thailand. The education sectors, such as universities and schools, of China and Thailand, were affected to postpone the opening date and adopt a virtual learning approach. The ICHE between China and Thailand, which heavily rely on international mobility and exchange, is forced to suspend the cooperative programs and shift to virtual activities.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted stakeholder interviews and desk research.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population of this study was government officers, institution leaders, teachers, students, and entrepreneurs who are involved in China-Thailand ICHE. Random purposive sampling and criterion sampling are used to select research participants. There were eleven Chinese and fourteen Thais representatives ranging from the former director of the government institution, deputy dean of the public and private university, senior lecturer, senior officer of the company, to the student.

### Research Instrument

The instrument was mainly developed from the Framework for transnational collaborative partnerships of European higher education institutions of Karvounaraki et al. (2018) and The Framework for the effectiveness of higher education, research, and innovation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). The Item-Objective Congruence was evaluated by five experts (IOC = 0.88) to check the validity of 35 interview questions. After the revision, the instrument was rolled out through offline and online platforms.

### Data Collection

Twenty-five participants were interviewed through an offline and online semi-structured interview from February to May 2021. The interviews are conducted in either English, Chinese, or Thai depending on the preferred language of the interview chosen by participants themselves. Besides, desk research is employed to review official documents related to transnational cooperation in higher education and COVID-19.

### Analysis and Evaluation

The data sources from each group of stakeholders were used to triangulate findings to ensure the trustworthiness of analysis and result. Specifically, two coding cycles were applied to examine the interview transcripts and develop three categories of learned experience.

### Results

In responding the first research propose, the study categorized the learned experience and action of China-Thailand ICHE into three aspects as follow:

#### 1. Transforming for the Unplanned Plan

The ICHE mechanism and the joint committee are affected because the agreed agenda and timeframe are intervened. Specifically, several MOUs of Chinese and Thai universities that involve student and teacher mobility has suffered from the travel restriction.

The joint committees between Chinese and Thai professors are shifted to virtual to monitor education centres and research projects. The onsite monitoring is changed to a mixture between live broadcast and domestic committee evaluation. The research participants from Chinese and Thai government representatives highlighted the revision of the budgeting plan of each partner to support new online activities. This virtual meeting saves the cost of travelling and accommodation for the host university. However, there is no specific approach to ensure that the university partner contributes their resources to the cooperation as they committed to the agreement. A participant from Chinese university representatives stated that he could only trust each partner university to contribute the best effort under this uncertain situation.

## 2. Virtual Mobility of Student and Teacher

International and local students involved in transnational cooperation in higher education are restricted to travel across the border. Specifically, the joint degree and dual degree programs resulting from the MOU between China and Thailand were strongly affected. These degree programs required the students to take classes in both China and Thailand universities.

The degree program offers virtual classes to those who expect to complete the degree on time—some students who have difficulty with virtual learning decided to drop their education and wait for the border to open. The research participants from the teacher and student representatives of the two countries raised that student short-term exchange program, such as culture and language, internship, and specific studying programs, is postponed and changed to a virtual exchange. Several language students mentioned that they have difficulty learning a foreign language at home. Some are unable to concentrate well on virtual learning. Some organizations and companies, such as the United Nations and World Bank, offered the virtual internship program so the student could do the internship at home.

The visiting between and partner representatives and scholars is challenging to continue. The side-visit is necessary for scholars and researchers who need to collect data in the field, which they cannot find in their home country. Some of them took the risk to travel across countries for collecting

the data. Several researchers adjusted their research methods and used virtual communication to gain the data. In China and Thailand cooperation in higher education, the visa application for international travellers is limited.

## 3. Webinar for Academic and Public

The virtual academic conference resulting from China and Thailand cooperation in education was opened to diverse participants to attend. Several webinars provide electronic certification, which benefits participants in knowledge and resume development. The 2020 Chinese-Thai Strategic Research Seminar was adopted the virtual approach to present and discuss the decided topics. The cloud-based video communications application and live broadcast were used to communicate among Chinese and Thai participants. The seminar opened its proceeding by posting on the website where the public can freely access it.

The webinar saves cost and time for the host, partner, scholar, and audience. The research participants of Chinese and Thai university representatives highlighted that they could save travel and accommodation costs and gain international knowledge and experience. The host university and cooperation partner can allocate the travel and accommodation fund to amplify other aspects of cooperation, for instance, several research grants and audiences. The research participant said they have the changes to listen to the speech and presentation of the well-known scholars and interact with them online. The presenter and audience can widely participate in the conference regardless of the place, cost,

and time. The research participants from the teacher and student representatives of both countries mentioned that they could come back to watch the conference record when they are available and select to listen to some parts they are interested in.

In responding the second research propose, the study proposed six prospects for future China-Thailand ICHE. The details are elaborated in the discussion section.

### **1. Flexible Cooperation Framework**

The research participants from Chinese and Thai government representatives mentioned that most frameworks are open for every higher education institution to decide the appropriate level of adjustment and involvement. The findings pointed that Chinese and Thai institutions have continually improved the level of cooperation by contributing funds, implementing practical action plans, promoting the quality of the virtual program, and targeting high-skill development.

### **2. Mutual Accountability**

The study found that the representative of China and Thailand universities participated in virtual mutual assessment enhancing transparency and mutual accountability for several joint degree programs and joint research project monitoring. A notable example of the joint review is the Chinese-Thai joint committee on scientific and technical cooperation.

### **3. Virtual Cooperation**

The study found that the office of international affairs and the international cooperation centre of every university play

a vital role in facilitating closer cooperation, ensuring an accomplishment of the cooperation framework. The university representatives of China and Thailand stated that the office of international affairs should conduct an annual survey to explore the need and plan for the cooperation of students, faculty, and partner university.

### **4. Quality of Education Exchange**

The quality of virtual learning exchange and joint degree programs need support in terms of the context-specific plan and framework to cope with the outbreak and roll-out learning programs. The useful indicator should be prioritized to ensure the quality virtual exchange and joint degree and mitigate risks related to the discontinuity of cooperation.

### **5. Virtual Research Collaboration**

Research participants from government and university representatives of both countries pointed that the China and Thailand cooperation provides a competitive research grant and incentive to attract capable scholars. The scholarship was provided to help talented scholars who lack financial support to involve in the programs.

### **6. Digital Infrastructure**

Not all institutions can roll out transnational cooperation activity because of the lack of good digital tools and advanced communication technology. The university should ensure the development and investment in digital infrastructure, such as internet backbone, wi-fi network, cloud storage and software service, and educational application.

## Discussion

The pandemic disrupted the way that we live and learn. Despite the uncertainty and across the world and education landscape, humankind has continued to find a better way to get through it resiliently (Crain et al., 2021). In this context, transnational cooperation, exchanging and visiting, and academic collaboration was forced to adopt the online approach (Yang & Huang, 2021). The experience and action of ICHE between China and Thailand demonstrated the effort to continue and enhance the cooperation against the challenges of the outbreak. Many activities resulting from the cooperation are implemented through the virtual for all student, teacher, and institution exchanges (OECD, 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021a). Since the educational institutions shall take the long-term development of virtual education into their account, this section intended to decode the effort of China and Thailand cooperation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Encouraging Flexible Cooperation Framework and Plan

The cooperation framework of the MOU is a blueprint to drive ICHE. In the context of the COVID-19 disruption, the framework should promote engagement among stakeholders and encourage institutions to use their procedures for planning, adjusting, managing, and executing according to their context (UNESCO, 2021b). The MOU shall pronounce adjustable objectives that allow institutions to co-develop their specific program. As highlighted in the report

of UNESCO (2021b), the institution shall play a supportive role to facilitate a sub-unit cooperation, such as the cooperation between department and program. Moja (2021) implied that the university should provide information and recommendations about the framework that actors can specific the scope of collaboration and implementation suitable to the virtual approach the most.

China and Thailand have signed several education agreements for more than four decades. The result of adjusted objectives and activities should come from the stakeholder's involvement (UNESCO, 2021b). All university partners should be mutually accountable and take responsibility for delivering on their respective commitments and contributions. Nevertheless, some universities were suffering from this radical change and infinite adjustment (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2021a). The flexible framework for transnational cooperation should form a feasible objective and practical indicator that led to a rigid action plan addressing the uncertainty of the outbreak (UNESCO, 2021b).

### Enhancing Mutual Accountability

In the context of the outbreak, establishing virtual inclusive mutual assessment reviews, regular joint assessment against cooperation objectives, and virtual involvement of other stakeholders can ensure mutual accountability among partners. Information on cooperation should be publicly available at institutional and individual levels (OECD & United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019). The record and cooperation framework should

be open for teachers and students to access. Institutions are the key for delivering information and activity regarding their respective commitments and contributions (UNSECO, 2021a; UNSECO, 2021b).

This transnational committee determines the term of bilateral cooperation academic project that opens for Chinese/Thai public organizations and academic institutions to submit the proposal. Some research participants from China and Thai universities stated that they experience the virtual mutual assessment, which the assessors comprise of various stakeholders. The stakeholder invited to review the cooperation activity included the ministry of education, partner academic institution, private organization, enterprise, academic staff, student, parent, and community.

Although there are several challenges of virtual interaction, research participants from Chinese university representatives implied that participating in the mutual assessment made them realize their responsibility and feel that they are a part of the cooperation. Nevertheless, there are still questions regarding the reliability and accuracy of the review outcome from the virtual assessment since the reviewer cannot physically monitor some aspects of the program. The domestic reviewers may overrate the performance of their program. The mechanism that ensures a fair and trustable assessment should be pronounced (OECD, 2021).

#### **Advocating Virtual Cooperation and Quality of Educational Mobility**

The office shall communicate with

relevant stakeholders and guide the faculty to implement the virtual cooperation activity (UNESCO, 2021b).

In the context of the pandemic, the office of international affairs of Chinese and Thai universities facilitated the virtual exchange of teacher and student and communicated with partners related to the international cooperation. Specifically, the office started the dialogue and formally appointed all stakeholders to the virtual discussion. Some faculties and departments formed a particular unit that deals with international affairs.

Although the office of international affairs is crucial for maintaining and further cooperation, the university and department shall regularly communicate with a partner to develop content and activity responding to the pandemic (Jung et al., 2021). For example, the engineering department shall cooperate in designing an engineering exchange and research program, which could be done virtually with students and stakeholders who benefited the most. Since the program planning and implementation need support in terms of specific knowledge, the department shall closely contact their domestic and international affairs and actively interact with the international affairs of partner institutions or the person in charge (UNESCO, 2021a).

ICHE is at the crossroad, surrounded by the COVID-19 outbreak and uncertainty. Universities worldwide were interrupted and forced to adopt a virtual learning approach (Yang & Huang, 2021). The university should support cooperation in strengthening remote



learning and facilitating the joint program of departments. The context-specific plan and framework should be guided and implemented to ensure students' safety and health, social-emotional wellbeing, and learning outcome (UNESCO, 2021a).

#### **Strengthening Virtual Research Collaboration and Webinar**

The quality and feasibility of virtual research collaboration are crucial to producing knowledge products reflecting the effort of transnational cooperation. The joint committee on academic cooperation or the representative should encourage the transnational virtual joint research team and support mechanism. The mechanism shall involve and attract talented researchers, educators, and entrepreneurs from both domestic and abroad to ensure the quality of the research output (Moja, 2021; UNESCO, 2021b).

The cooperation should support and incentivize to achieve performance against the framework. Moreover, it should prioritize the research product's positive impact and mutual benefit for all relevant stakeholders and the public.

#### **Advancing Digital Infrastructure**

After the COVID-19 disruption, the accessibility and quality of digital infrastructure and tools influenced students' learning experience (Jung et al., 2021; Moja, 2021). These are the foundation for broadening and sharing knowledge in future learning of the COVID-19 era.

Like what I discussed in the webinar section for the academic and public above,

the COVID-19 and digital disruption boost the open knowledge culture that decentralized knowledge, harnessed diverse participants and promoted knowledge common (Crain et al., 2021; Peters, 2021). Furthermore, the institutions should ensure that the public can reach out to knowledge products of ICHE through a virtual and digital platform. In specific, the digital conference between multi-partner universities should be made available for everyone.

Nevertheless, deeper cooperation and broader engagement are needed to reach open knowledge culture addressing the challenges and opportunities of the outbreak. Higher education should reflect its role and work before and after the pandemic to reposition itself and plan for future cooperation.

#### **Conclusion**

Firstly, the study found three main experiences of the China-Thailand ICHE: 1) transforming for the unplanned plan, 2) virtual mobility of student and teacher, and 3) webinars for academic. The study revealed that virtual cooperation was adopted to continue agreements on university-to-university collaboration. Taking China and Thailand cooperation in higher education as an example, the MOU and activity plan were adjusted. The student exchange, scholar visit, and research collaboration were shifted to the virtual one. This virtual education could save time and cost for transnational cooperation, but direct interaction is critical for collective knowledge development and cross-cultural learning. The webinar replaced the on-side academic

conferences. This virtual conference provides the opportunity for a wider group of people to access collective knowledge.

Secondly, six prospects for future cooperation were investigated, including 1) flexible cooperation framework, 2) mutual accountability, 3) virtual cooperation, 4) quality of education exchange, 5) virtual research collaboration, and 6) digital infrastructure. The flexible cooperation framework and mutual accountability should be encouraged through virtual joint committees and international affairs efforts. A contact-specific plan should be advocated to ensure the quality of virtual learning, exchange, and research. Virtual cooperation and knowledge production should consider the positive impact on the public. The digital infrastructure of the institution should be advanced to prepare and cope with the pandemic and future uncertainty. However, the university alone cannot effectively cope with the outbreak; the support and collaboration from stakeholders, such as the government, private sector, and community, is crucial for collective development and growth.

Even the pandemic distances people apart, the effort of institution and advancement

of virtual communication technology rejoin the transnational cooperation to furnish the collective knowledge and shared learning culture. The collaboration needed further encouragement for increasing a deeper engagement (UNESCO, 2021b). The higher education institution, leading an innovative and creative society, should seek opportunity, take significant action, and be open to different approaches for addressing challenges and developing society.

### Recommendations

Future research may employ the comparative approach to identify and analyze ICHE at the institution level of China and Thailand. The comparative study may select the setting that shares several commons, such as the education system and institution profile so that the study can control factors that influence the research finding.

The quantitative analysis that accesses the correlation between the cooperation, effectiveness, and satisfaction among teachers and students across China and Thailand universities who experience the cooperation program is suggested.

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