

Developing an International Double Degree Undergraduate Chinese Language Program in a Thai Public University: From Theory to Practice

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 14 Aug 2025 Accepted: 4 Sep 2025 Available online: 26 Dec 2025	<i>International double degree programs have become an increasingly prominent mechanism for advancing higher education internationalization, yet empirical, practice-based accounts of their development and early implementation—particularly at the undergraduate level and within non-Western contexts—remain limited. This article presents a reflective case study of the development and early enactment of an international undergraduate double degree program in the Chinese language jointly delivered by a Thai public university and a Chinese partner university. Drawing on institutional records, curriculum documents, cohort monitoring data, and reflective observations accumulated since the program's launch in 2021, the study examines how internationalization principles were translated into curriculum design, governance arrangements, and operational practice. The analysis traces the program's development journey through strategic partnership formation, curriculum co-design guided by outcome-based education, and the establishment of administrative and support structures. It then examines implementation in practice through the experiences of the first student cohorts, highlighting both achievements and challenges related to language proficiency thresholds, academic adjustment, student mobility, and institutional coordination. The reflections foreground how student experiences and feedback were used not only as outcomes of implementation but also as inputs for curriculum improvement, illustrating a continuous, stakeholder-informed development cycle. Rather than offering a prescriptive model, the article contributes a contextually grounded and critically reflective account of Thai-Chinese undergraduate collaboration. It provides insights into the complexities, negotiations, and adaptive strategies involved in cross-border double degree programs, offering transferable lessons for institutions seeking to design, implement, or refine similar initiatives in ASEAN and comparable higher education contexts.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

The intensification of global interconnectedness in the twenty-first century has reshaped the competencies expected of university graduates. Multilingual proficiency and the capacity to

navigate diverse cultural, academic, and institutional environments are increasingly recognized as critical assets in contemporary labor markets (Msomphora, 2025). Within the ASEAN region, these competencies have gained particular significance in light of regional integration, expanding student mobility, and evolving geopolitical and economic relationships, especially between Southeast Asia and China. In this context, demand for advanced Chinese language proficiency and intercultural competence has extended beyond traditional domains such as diplomacy and trade to sectors including education, tourism, technology, and cultural industries (Ge, 2022).

In response, Thailand's higher education policy framework has emphasized the internationalization of public universities as a strategy to enhance global engagement while addressing national human capital development. Internationalization in the Thai context is closely linked to curriculum reform, graduate employability, and strategic partnerships with key regional actors, particularly China (Altbach & de Wit, 2018). Within this policy landscape, international double degree programs have emerged as one mechanism for advancing cross-border academic collaboration, enabling students to pursue integrated study pathways and obtain qualifications from partner institutions. Such initiatives, however, are shaped not only by global discourses of internationalization but also by national regulatory frameworks, institutional capacity, and regional priorities (Knight, 2015).

Although the literature on higher education internationalization and cross-border programs has expanded substantially, much of this work remains concentrated on macro-level policy analysis, student mobility flows, or institutional strategy, often drawing on Western or Global North contexts (Altbach et al., 2019). Comparatively fewer studies offer detailed, practice-based accounts of how international double degree programs are designed, negotiated, and implemented within specific national and institutional settings in Southeast Asia. This gap is particularly evident in undergraduate programs developed through Thai-Chinese university collaboration, where differences in academic standards, regulatory systems, language regimes, and institutional expectations shape implementation in complex ways (Chan, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this article presents a practice-based case study examining the development and early implementation of an international double degree undergraduate Chinese language program jointly delivered by a Thai public university and a leading Chinese university. Rather than offering a conventional empirical evaluation, the article adopts a reflective and analytically informed approach, drawing on institutional documents, curriculum records, and implementation experience to examine how internationalization principles and curriculum frameworks were operationalized in practice (Shenderova, 2023). The analysis focuses on institutional decision-making processes, partnership formation, curriculum co-design, and the administrative and academic structures required to sustain cross-border undergraduate collaboration.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, it provides a context-sensitive account of how an international double degree undergraduate Chinese language program was developed and operationalized within a Thai public university, an area that remains underrepresented in the literature on higher education internationalization, particularly in relation to Thai-Chinese

cooperation (Ge, 2022). Second, by linking internationalization and curriculum design frameworks with institutional practice, the article illustrates how abstract policy ambitions are translated into concrete academic and administrative arrangements under real-world constraints (Knight, 2015). Third, through reflective analysis of early implementation, the study offers transferable insights into curriculum alignment, student mobility management, and quality assurance that may inform other institutions considering similar double degree initiatives within ASEAN and comparable higher education contexts.

Empirically and conceptually, this case responds to the limited availability of practice-based reflections on undergraduate double degree programs developed through Thai-Chinese collaboration, particularly those that foreground negotiation, adaptation, and institutional learning within cross-national regulatory and cultural environments.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

This section outlines the conceptual foundations that informed the development of the Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree Chinese language program. Rather than providing an exhaustive review of internationalization literature, it selectively draws on frameworks that are directly relevant to understanding how internationalization principles are translated into program-level design, curriculum alignment, and pedagogical practice in a cross-national setting.

Internationalization of higher education

Internationalization of higher education is commonly understood as the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the core functions of teaching, research, and service (Knight, 2004). Over time, scholarly discourse has moved beyond a narrow emphasis on student mobility to encompass more embedded and structural approaches, including curriculum internationalization, cross-border program delivery, and sustained institutional partnerships (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Leask, 2015; Shenderova, 2023). This shift reflects growing recognition that meaningful internationalization requires transformation at the program and institutional levels rather than reliance on isolated international activities. At the same time, scholars have cautioned against assuming internationalization to be uniformly beneficial or consistently implemented, noting that its forms and outcomes are shaped by institutional capacity and context (de Wit, 2011).

At the level of program design, international collaborative degree initiatives have emerged as concrete mechanisms through which internationalization policies are operationalized. International double degree programs, in particular, are frequently framed as strategic responses to institutional aspirations for global engagement and to national policy agendas that promote cross-border academic cooperation (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2011). In many Asian higher education systems, including those in ASEAN, such initiatives are closely linked to broader objectives related to human capital development, regional integration, and engagement with China as an increasingly influential educational partner (Mok & Han, 2016).

However, internationalization is enacted through the interaction of global discourses with national and local priorities, meaning that program development often involves negotiation across multiple levels of policy and institutional constraint (Marginson, 2018).

Despite the growing prominence of internationalization in higher education policy discourse, existing scholarship has tended to focus primarily on macro-level analysis, such as national strategies, institutional positioning, or patterns of student mobility. Comparatively fewer studies examine how internationalization agendas are enacted through concrete program-level decisions, including curriculum alignment, governance coordination, and administrative arrangements within specific institutional contexts (Healey, 2015; Oba & Petras, 2016). This gap is particularly evident in undergraduate-level collaborations and in Thai-Chinese partnerships, where differences in regulatory frameworks, academic standards, and language regimes introduce additional layers of complexity.

From a program development perspective, internationalization should therefore be understood not only as a policy aspiration but as a negotiated process shaped by institutional capacity, regulatory constraints, and disciplinary context. Practice-based case studies are particularly valuable in illuminating how internationalization frameworks are interpreted and adapted in situ, revealing the institutional processes and adaptive strategies that underpin cross-border academic collaboration. In this regard, examining internationalization through the lens of a Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree program provides insight into how global policy discourses are translated into program design and academic practice within a specific national and regional setting.

Understanding double degrees

International double degree programs represent a distinct form of cross-border academic collaboration in which two partner universities jointly design and deliver an integrated program of study that leads to the award of two separate qualifications, one from each institution (Oba & Petras, 2016). Unlike single-degree programs that operate within a single institutional and national regulatory framework, double degree programs function across multiple academic systems and therefore require formal agreements on curriculum structure, credit transfer, assessment standards, and graduation requirements. This multi-system operation places double degree programs at the intersection of academic design, institutional governance, and regulatory compliance (Knight, 2014).

Double degree programs are commonly distinguished from joint and dual degree models. Joint degree programs involve the co-award of a single qualification under a unified curriculum and governance structure, while dual degree programs may allow students to pursue two degrees through parallel but not necessarily integrated pathways (Chan, 2022). By contrast, double degree programs require substantial curricular alignment and mutual recognition while preserving institutional autonomy in degree conferral. This intermediate configuration demands intensive coordination between partner institutions, particularly with respect to academic calendars, assessment alignment, quality assurance mechanisms, and monitoring of student progression (Hou et al., 2013).

The literature identifies a range of potential benefits associated with double degree programs. For students, these include enriched academic experiences, sustained intercultural engagement, and enhanced employability in global labor markets. For institutions, double degree programs strengthen bilateral partnerships, expand academic networks, and create opportunities for faculty collaboration and joint curriculum development (Shenderova, 2023). At the same time, scholars caution that such programs are resource-intensive and require sustained institutional commitment to maintain academic coherence and student support across jurisdictions (Healey, 2008).

Taken together, existing studies suggest that the effectiveness of double degree programs depends less on their formal structural configuration than on the quality of curricular integration, governance coordination, and shared academic understanding between partner institutions. However, much of the literature remains descriptive or typological, offering limited insight into how institutions negotiate these demands in practice, particularly at the undergraduate level and within non-Western collaborative contexts. This gap underscores the value of practice-based analyses that examine how double degree programs are designed, implemented, and sustained within specific policy, cultural, and regulatory environments. The present case study responds to this need by foregrounding institutional decision-making processes and adaptive strategies underpinning a Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree program.

Chinese language education in a cross-national setting

In Thailand, Chinese language education occupies a distinctive position shaped by long-standing historical ties, expanding economic integration, and deepening educational cooperation with China (Ge, 2022). Beyond its function as a foreign language, Chinese proficiency increasingly operates as a form of academic and professional capital, particularly within higher education pathways linked to international mobility, cross-border degree programs, and employment in China-related sectors (Chen, 2024). In this national context, Chinese language education is closely intertwined with state policy priorities, institutional internationalization strategies, and graduate employability objectives (Altbach & de Wit, 2018). Consequently, in Thai-Chinese double degree programs, Chinese language proficiency is not merely a curricular component but a structural requirement that mediates students' academic progression, access to mobility, and capacity to meet partner-institution standards.

Against this backdrop, the inclusion of Chinese language education as a conceptual focus is central to this study, as language proficiency functions both as a core academic outcome and as a key mediating factor in cross-border program implementation. While the global expansion of Chinese language education reflects China's growing economic, cultural, and geopolitical influence (Chen, 2024), in cross-national programs, language education necessarily extends beyond linguistic skill acquisition. It encompasses cultural literacy, intercultural communication, and context-sensitive language use that enable students to operate effectively across academic and social environments.

A recurring challenge in cross-national Chinese language education lies in addressing the culturally embedded nature of the language, particularly in relation to pragmatics, discourse

conventions, and implicit cultural meanings. These features often require explicit pedagogical mediation and scaffolded instruction to support students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Taguchi, 2015). Differences in students' prior exposure to Chinese language and culture further complicate instructional design, necessitating flexible pedagogical approaches and differentiated support.

Within international double degree programs, these pedagogical challenges are compounded by institutional and curricular differences between partner universities. Variations in teaching philosophies, classroom interaction norms, assessment practices, and expectations of learner autonomy can influence both teaching effectiveness and student adjustment. Ensuring coherence in learning outcomes and assessment standards across institutions, therefore, requires sustained dialogue, collaborative curriculum planning, and shared pedagogical understanding among faculty members (Chen, 2024).

Although the literature provides valuable insights into Chinese language pedagogy and cross-cultural learning, relatively little attention has been paid to how Chinese language curricula are designed and implemented within structured undergraduate double degree programs. In particular, practice-based analyses examining how language education is aligned with cross-national program structures, mobility pathways, and assessment regimes remain limited. By situating Chinese language education within the institutional and curricular realities of a Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree program, this study contributes a contextually grounded perspective on the intersection of language, internationalization, and program design.

THE DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY

The development of the international double degree undergraduate Chinese language program was not a linear administrative process but a negotiated and iterative journey shaped by policy priorities, institutional constraints, and cross-cultural academic dialogue. Moving from conceptual alignment to operational implementation required sustained engagement between the Thai and Chinese partner universities, as well as continuous adaptation to differing regulatory frameworks, academic traditions, and organizational practices. This section traces the key stages of program development, highlighting not only procedural steps but also the institutional decision-making processes and adaptive strategies through which internationalization principles were translated into a workable undergraduate double degree program.

Strategic partnership formation

The genesis of the program lay in the mutual recognition by the Thai and Chinese partner universities of the strategic value of deeper academic collaboration. For the Thai university, the initiative aligned with national priorities to internationalize curricula, diversify academic offerings, and strengthen engagement with China as a key economic and cultural partner. It also corresponded with institutional objectives to enhance educational quality, broaden

curriculum pathways, and cultivate graduates with global competence. For the Chinese partner university, the program offered an opportunity to expand international engagement, attract international students, and promote Chinese language and culture through structured academic cooperation.

Partnership negotiations were initiated at the senior institutional leadership level to ensure alignment with national policy frameworks and internal governance structures. Early discussions revealed the need to reconcile differing expectations regarding academic authority, student progression requirements, and regulatory compliance across the two higher education systems. In response, both universities engaged in structured dialogue to clarify areas of cooperation and establish shared principles for program delivery. This process resulted in the drafting of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining governance arrangements, the scope of collaboration, and mutual institutional commitments.

Subsequent negotiations focused on operationalizing the double degree arrangement. These discussions addressed qualification requirements, Chinese language proficiency thresholds for student mobility, tuition fee arrangements, graduation criteria, and mechanisms for academic and pastoral support during the study period in China. Aligning these elements across two national higher education systems required iterative negotiation and institutional compromise, culminating in a formal agreement that provided a clear framework for program implementation. This stage of development underscored the importance of leadership-level engagement and detailed institutional coordination in establishing a sustainable Thai-Chinese double degree partnership.

Curriculum co-design

Curriculum co-design was guided by both the educational philosophy of the Thai university and the specific educational philosophy underpinning the double degree program. At the institutional level, the university's philosophy emphasizes outcome-oriented learning, student-centered pedagogy, and the holistic development of graduates equipped with global competence and ethical awareness. At the program level, these principles were further shaped by the aim of preparing students to function effectively in cross-national academic environments through advanced Chinese language proficiency, intercultural communication, and academic adaptability.

In alignment with these guiding philosophies, the curriculum was developed using the principles of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and a backward design approach to ensure coherence between intended learning outcomes and instructional practice. This process involved defining Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs), aligning Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) with the PLOs, and ensuring that teaching and learning activities and assessment methods were constructively aligned. Emphasis was placed on measurable learning outcomes, student-centered learning, and continuous feedback mechanisms to support curriculum review and improvement.

The curriculum development process began with a systematic mapping of program learning outcomes against the graduate profiles and academic standards of both partner universities.

This comparative exercise served as a critical analytical step, identifying areas of convergence that could be integrated across institutions, as well as gaps that required the creation of new courses or the adaptation of existing ones. Rather than relying on a simple credit-transfer model, the partners prioritized curricular coherence to ensure that learning progression remained academically meaningful across national contexts.

Chinese language proficiency was identified as a central pillar of the program, with students expected to achieve HSK Level 6 upon graduation. To support this objective, the curriculum includes a sequence of progressively advanced language modules, complemented by courses in philosophy, literature, history, and Chinese society. Intercultural communication competencies are integrated throughout the curriculum, with experiential learning opportunities during the mobility period in China used to situate language development within authentic academic and social contexts.

In practice, ensuring students' smooth transition between the Thai and Chinese university systems required extensive coordination and careful planning. This process involved aligning curriculum structures, systematizing study plans, and benchmarking courses for equivalence based on clearly defined learning outcomes. Transparent frameworks were also established for course transfer, credit recognition, and assessment using shared academic standards. The curriculum co-design process culminated in joint approval of the final program by the academic councils of both universities, reflecting coordinated academic governance across two higher education systems.

Operational and administrative structures

Operationalizing the double degree program required the establishment of a dedicated administrative framework to manage admissions, student mobility, and academic coordination between partner institutions. For the first cohort, student recruitment was conducted through a direct admission process managed by the program, allowing flexibility in selection during the initial implementation phase. From the second cohort onward, recruitment was integrated into the Thai University Central Admission System (TCAS), administered by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, to align the program with national higher education admission policy and institutional procedures.

As an international program delivered through both Chinese and English as media of instruction, admission requirements include minimum Chinese language proficiency thresholds, English GPA requirements to ensure readiness for English-medium general education courses, and structured interviews designed to assess applicants' motivation and preparedness for cross-cultural learning. These criteria aim to ensure that admitted students possess both the academic foundation and the personal resilience required to navigate the linguistic, academic, and cultural demands of a cross-border educational environment.

The mobility schedule was structured to support coherent academic progression across both higher education systems while minimizing disruption to program continuity. Students complete the first academic year at the Thai university, focusing on foundational language development

and cultural studies, before transferring to the Chinese partner university for advanced coursework and immersive learning experiences. The final stage of study takes place at the home institution to support thesis completion in accordance with the academic regulations of the Chinese Ministry of Education and the curriculum requirements of the Thai university.

To ensure academic coherence and effective supervision, thesis advising is jointly undertaken by Thai and Chinese supervisors, who collaborate in providing consultation, guidance, progress monitoring, and targeted support throughout the thesis process. Alongside academic arrangements, a coordinated support framework was developed to facilitate students' transition and well-being during mobility. Academic advisors from the Thai university provide ongoing support throughout the program, while additional advisors from the Chinese partner university offer on-site assistance during the period of study in China.

These arrangements address a range of practical and welfare-related considerations, including visa coordination, accommodation, health insurance, emergency support, and compliance with institutional regulations in both countries. Developing this support framework required multiple rounds of negotiation to clarify roles, communication channels, and support protocols, fostering shared responsibility for student academic progress and well-being.

In addition, faculty exchange initiatives were integrated into the operational framework to promote pedagogical alignment and mutual understanding between the partner universities. Faculty members participated in regular meetings to exchange perspectives on teaching practices and student support, while Thai faculty engaged in academic seminars and research presentations related to Chinese language pedagogy and cross-cultural studies. These activities supported ongoing curriculum alignment, strengthened professional relationships, and contributed to the long-term sustainability of the double degree program.

Taken together, the stages of strategic partnership formation, curriculum co-design, and the establishment of operational and administrative structures illustrate how internationalization principles were gradually translated into an institutionalized undergraduate double degree program. Rather than unfolding through a linear sequence of steps, program development emerged as an iterative process characterized by ongoing negotiation, coordination, and adaptation across policy, academic, and administrative domains. These foundational decisions shaped not only the formal architecture of the program but also the conditions under which it would later be enacted in practice. The following section, therefore, shifts attention to the initial student cohorts to examine how these design choices materialized during early implementation and how students and faculty experienced the realities of cross-border undergraduate education.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the development of the Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree program progressed through interconnected stages that collectively transformed internationalization principles into a workable and sustainable program structure.

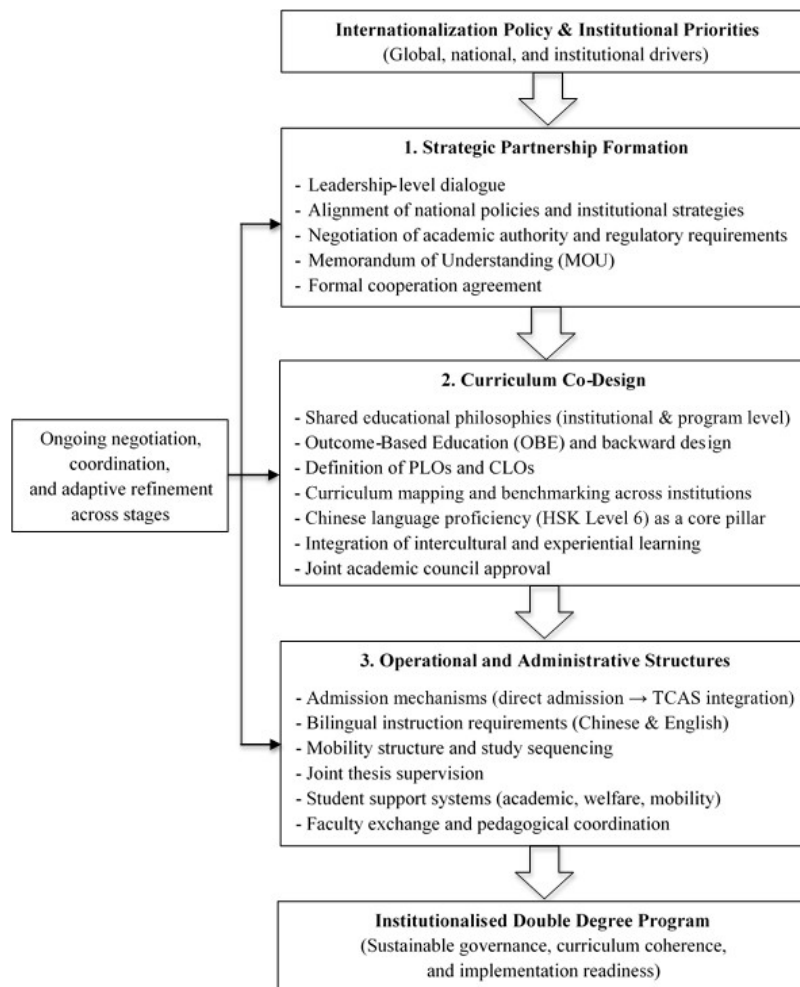


Figure 1 Development journey of the Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree program

IMPLEMENTATION IN PRACTICE: THE FIRST COHORTS

Following the completion of curriculum design and the establishment of operational and administrative structures, the program entered its initial implementation phase with the first student cohort in 2021. This stage marked a critical transition from planning to practice and provided an opportunity to observe how agreed frameworks functioned in real institutional and pedagogical settings, as well as how students and faculty navigated the demands of a cross-border undergraduate double degree program.

Recruitment and student preparation

Recruitment of the first cohort focused on students who met the academic and language eligibility requirements of the program and who expressed interest in international and cross-cultural learning. Admission decisions took into account the bilingual instructional

context and anticipated mobility requirements, with the aim of ensuring that students were academically prepared for study conducted in both Chinese and English and capable of adjusting to different academic environments. During early implementation, clearly articulated admission criteria and structured interviews provided a practical basis for student selection, although subsequent experience revealed variation in students' readiness to cope with the full academic and linguistic demands of the program.

Prior to mobility, students participated in a structured preparation program intended to support academic readiness and personal adjustment. This program addressed areas such as emotional resilience, problem-solving, stress management, time management, interpersonal communication, and adaptation to cross-cultural learning contexts. Orientation activities also introduced students to differences in classroom norms, communication styles, and academic expectations at the partner institution. Administrative briefings covered practical aspects of mobility, including visa procedures, accommodation arrangements, health insurance, and health and safety considerations. While this preparatory phase helped reduce uncertainty, its effectiveness varied across students and became an important reference point for later institutional reflection.

Teaching and learning across institutional contexts

During the first academic year, teaching and learning were conducted at the Thai university, with a focus on foundational Chinese language development, Chinese culture, and intercultural communication. When students transitioned to the Chinese partner university, they encountered a more intensive instructional environment characterized by higher contact hours, sustained use of Chinese as the primary medium of instruction, and different assessment practices. For some students, this transition required a period of adjustment as they adapted to new expectations regarding academic independence and assessment intensity.

Faculty coordination across institutions played a central role in maintaining continuity of learning outcomes and assessment standards. Thai and Chinese instructors engaged in regular communication through digital platforms, including WeChat and VooV Meeting, to discuss course content, monitor student progress, and clarify assessment expectations. These platforms also supported access to learning materials, academic consultation, and supervision across national boundaries. Student feedback suggested that exposure to different pedagogical approaches prompted greater awareness of learning strategies and academic responsibility, though the extent to which students benefited from these differences varied.

Early outcomes and observed challenges

During early implementation, students demonstrated mixed academic trajectories. Many met expected milestones in coursework and language development, while others encountered difficulties related to linguistic demands, assessment practices, and adaptation to the host academic environment. Students reported increased familiarity with academic Chinese and greater intercultural awareness over time, but also noted challenges in managing workload intensity and academic expectations across two systems.

Operational challenges were also observed. Administrative processes such as visa coordination, accommodation arrangements, and scheduling occasionally affected mobility planning and required ongoing coordination between the partner universities. These experiences highlighted the importance of responsive communication channels and flexible administrative procedures in supporting cross-border undergraduate programs.

Program monitoring and early adjustments

Implementation of the first cohorts generated valuable institutional insights. Regular coordination meetings involving academic coordinators, administrative staff, and student representatives provided opportunities to monitor progress, identify emerging issues, and respond to student needs. Observations from early implementation informed incremental adjustments to preparatory activities, academic advising practices, and support mechanisms for subsequent cohorts.

Overall, the initial implementation phase underscored both the potential and the complexity of delivering an international undergraduate double degree program. Although the established structures provided a functional foundation, early experiences revealed areas that required further refinement and adaptive response. These observations provide the empirical grounding for the reflective analysis presented in the following section, which examines key successes, challenges, and adaptive strategies in greater depth.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the early implementation process encompassed interconnected stages of recruitment and student preparation, teaching and learning across institutional contexts, observed outcomes and challenges, and program monitoring mechanisms that informed early adjustments and institutional learning.

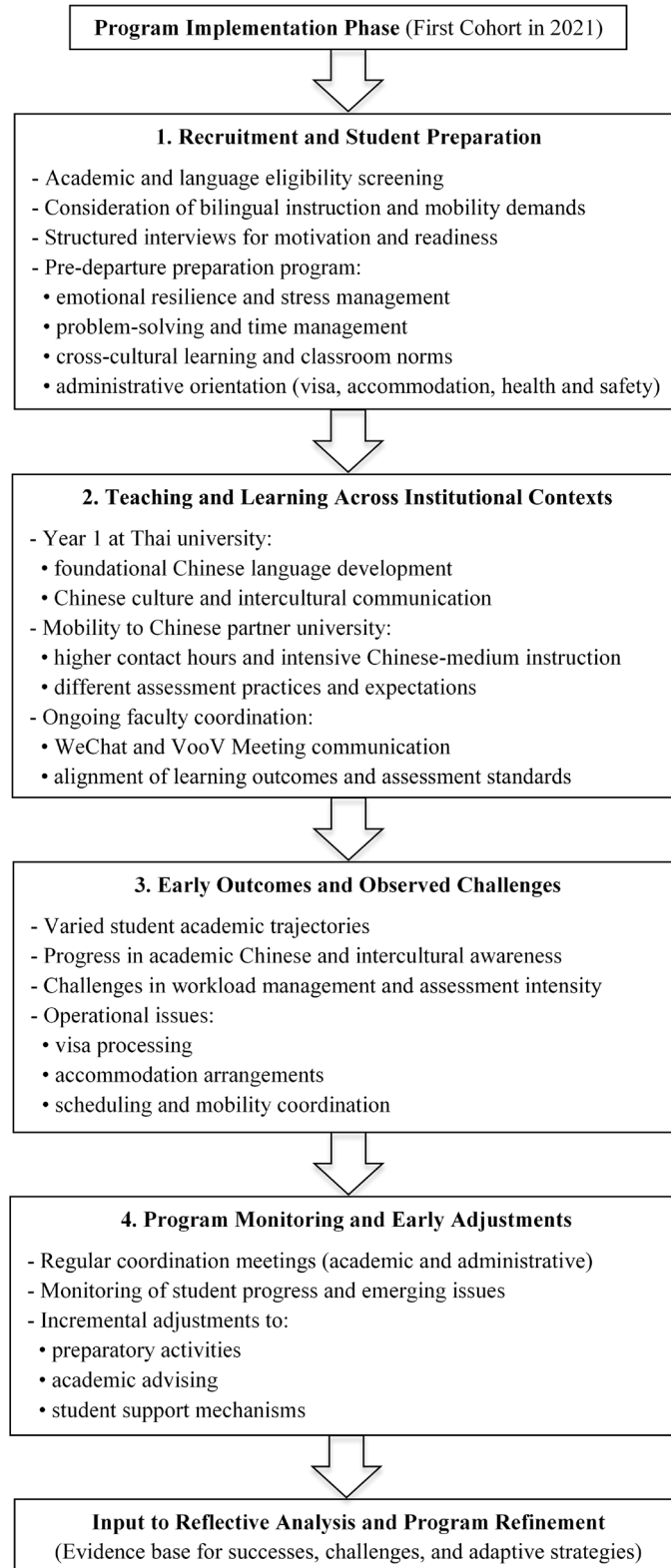


Figure 2 Implementation in practice: The first cohorts

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Drawing on the experiences of the first student cohorts, this section reflects on key successes, challenges, and adaptive strategies that emerged during the early implementation of the Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree program. The reflections are informed by institutional records, curriculum materials, cohort monitoring processes, and ongoing observations accumulated throughout program design, implementation, and review since the program's launch in 2021. Student experiences and feedback from early cohorts were treated not only as outcomes of implementation but also as inputs for curriculum improvement, consistent with a continuous, stakeholder-informed curriculum development cycle. Rather than offering empirical generalizations, the discussion foregrounds the practical realities, tensions, and institutional learning that shaped early enactment, contributing a practice-based perspective that remains relatively underrepresented in the literature on international undergraduate double degree programs.

Early implementation outcomes and student progression

The admission of the first cohort offered important insight into how initial program assumptions translated into students' lived academic experiences. Although the program enrolled 33 students from diverse educational backgrounds across Thailand—slightly exceeding the original target—the first year of implementation coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring all teaching and learning activities to be conducted online. This unexpected context fundamentally altered the early stages of the program, limiting opportunities for immersive language practice and intercultural engagement, and revealing that preparedness for online international learning had been implicitly assumed rather than systematically addressed in the original design.

Patterns of student progression over time highlighted the differentiated demands inherent in the international double degree structure. While some cases of attrition were linked to external opportunities or individual preference, others reflected the cumulative academic and linguistic pressures associated with meeting two sets of degree requirements. Most notably, although 27 students completed the program and graduated on time according to Thai university requirements, 17 students simultaneously met the Chinese university's graduation criteria on time. From a reflective standpoint, these outcomes underscored the uneven demands embedded within the international double degree structure and the heightened academic thresholds associated with meeting two sets of degree requirements. Challenges related to achieving HSK Level 6 proficiency and completing thesis requirements further illustrated that student progression in a double degree program cannot be understood as a uniform pathway but is shaped by the interaction of language thresholds, assessment regimes, and the timing and intensity of cross-border academic mobility.

Differential challenges and unequal experiences

Although the program was formally open to all qualified applicants, early implementation provided valuable insight into how student experiences varied under the demands of an international double degree structure. These differences were shaped by linguistic, academic,

financial, and psychosocial factors, highlighting areas where institutional assumptions required further refinement rather than indicating program deficiency. Linguistically, most students adapted quickly to Chinese-medium instruction in classroom settings; however, many encountered difficulties using Chinese in everyday situations, such as interacting with healthcare providers or local authorities. This distinction underscored a gap between academic language proficiency and functional communicative competence, reinforcing the importance of integrating real-life language use into curriculum and support planning.

From an academic perspective, the rigorous teaching and assessment practices of the Chinese partner university initially posed challenges, particularly in relation to assessment intensity and grading standards. While pre-departure preparation mitigated some of these difficulties, students' concerns about meeting academic expectations—especially the requirement to achieve HSK Level 6—revealed the cumulative pressure associated with dual qualification pathways. Financial considerations also shaped students' engagement with mobility, suggesting that access to double degree programs may be influenced by socioeconomic factors. In hindsight, earlier and more systematic guidance on scholarship opportunities from both Thai and Chinese institutions would have strengthened equitable participation.

Mental health and cultural adjustment emerged as significant but unevenly experienced dimensions of the mobility experience. Some students actively sought guidance from Thai faculty while studying in China, highlighting the continued importance of home-institution support structures. Others responded to cultural unfamiliarity by limiting social interaction to Thai peer groups, a strategy that offered emotional security but sometimes constrained opportunities for language immersion and intercultural learning. Collectively, these observations illustrate that international mobility, even within well-structured programs, produces differentiated learning experiences, underscoring the need for adaptive support mechanisms rather than uniform expectations of student adjustment.

Power, standards, and institutional asymmetries in Thai-Chinese collaboration

The implementation of the program also revealed underlying power asymmetries inherent in Thai-Chinese double degree arrangements. As degree conferral from the Chinese university was contingent on compliance with Chinese regulatory and academic standards, the Thai university necessarily aligned its requirements with those standards. This included adopting Chinese assessment rigor, thesis supervision procedures, and formal examination processes, as well as enforcing the non-negotiable requirement of HSK Level 6 for graduation.

While the Chinese partner university demonstrated pedagogical flexibility in accommodating Thai students' learning styles and cultural backgrounds, program implementation necessarily operated within the established regulatory frameworks governing degree conferral in China. At the same time, institutional flexibility on the Thai side was shaped by both national regulations and program design decisions, including fixed pathways for major selection after the first year and clearly defined thesis progression requirements. These conditions highlight that international double degree programs function within intersecting regulatory and institutional systems, requiring negotiated alignment among partners rather than complete symmetry in academic structures. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing

collaborative programs that are academically coherent, institutionally feasible, and responsive to students' learning needs.

Lessons learned and adaptive strategies

Reflecting on early implementation, several assumptions underpinning the initial curriculum design were refined in light of student experience and feedback. One area that warranted reconsideration was the strong emphasis on lecture-based Chinese language courses, which contributed to a demanding workload without consistently translating into greater learner autonomy. Insights gathered from the first cohort prior to graduation informed a curriculum reassessment, leading to a strategic shift toward reducing lecture-based language credits and expanding opportunities for self-directed learning, interdisciplinary coursework, project-based activities, and career-oriented skill development.

Taken together, these reflections underscore that effective double degree implementation depends not only on structural alignment but also on sustained responsiveness to student experience over time. The Thai-Chinese case demonstrates that, while international double degree programs can offer transformative learning opportunities, they simultaneously require careful attention to issues of access, student support, and institutional power relations. By making these tensions explicit, the analysis contributes to a more realistic and practice-informed understanding of cross-border higher education collaboration and offers transferable insights for institutions considering similar initiatives.

Figure 3 synthesizes these reflective insights from early program implementation by mapping student progression patterns, differentiated challenges, institutional power dynamics, and the adaptive strategies that informed ongoing curriculum and program refinement.

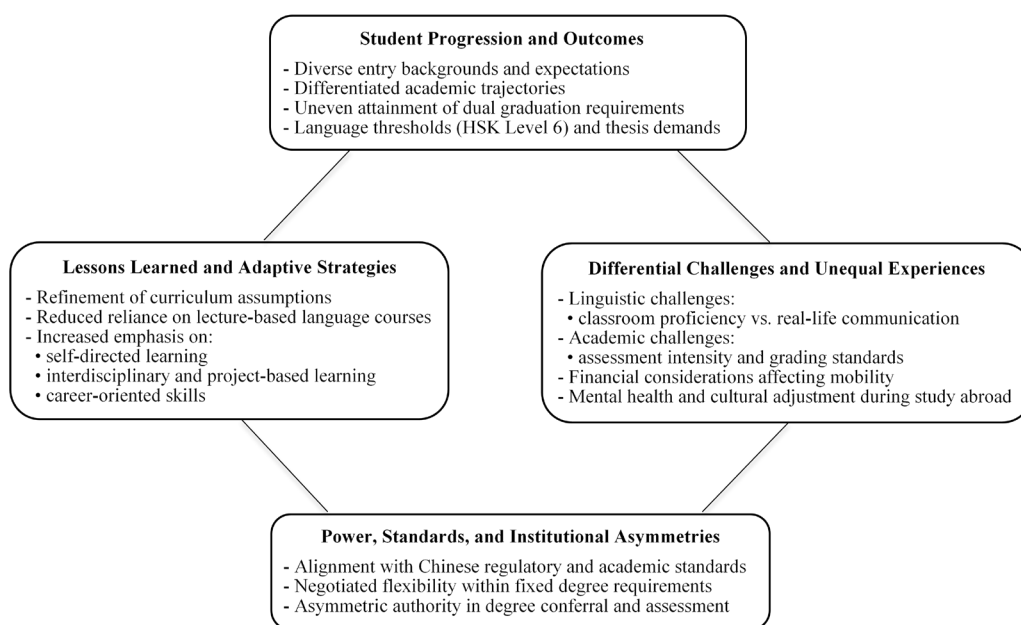


Figure 3 Reflections from the field: Early experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies

CONCLUSION

The development and early implementation of the international double degree undergraduate Chinese language program between a Thai public university and a Chinese partner illustrate how internationalization principles can be translated from conceptual intent into institutional practice. Moving from strategic planning through curriculum design and operational coordination to lived implementation, the program demonstrates how cross-border undergraduate collaboration is shaped by negotiation, institutional commitment, and ongoing adaptation within specific national and regulatory contexts.

From a program development perspective, the experience highlights the importance of aligning internationalization goals with curriculum structures, educational philosophy, and administrative capacity. The step-by-step process of partnership formation, curriculum co-design, and the establishment of operational and support mechanisms enabled the program to function across two higher education systems while maintaining academic coherence. At the same time, implementation with the first cohorts revealed the practical demands associated with managing student mobility, language thresholds, assessment expectations, and cross-institutional supervision.

The reflections emerging from early implementation underscore that international double degree programs do not produce uniform outcomes. While many students benefited from enhanced language proficiency, intercultural learning, and academic growth, others encountered challenges related to linguistic demands, academic adjustment, financial constraints, and personal well-being. These uneven experiences reinforce the need to view internationalization not as a linear or uniformly beneficial process, but as one that requires continuous monitoring, responsiveness, and institutional learning.

Rather than presenting a prescriptive model, this study offers a contextually grounded account of how a Thai-Chinese undergraduate double degree program was developed, enacted, and reflected upon in practice. The insights generated may be of value to other institutions in ASEAN and comparable settings that are considering or refining cross-border undergraduate collaborations. Most importantly, the experience suggests that the sustainability of international double degree programs depends less on their formal design than on the capacity of partner institutions to engage in ongoing dialogue, adapt to emerging challenges, and maintain a shared commitment to student learning and academic quality.

Declaration of AI used

The author acknowledges the use of AI-assisted tools such as ChatGPT in refining the language of several sentences and paragraphs in this article. However, these tools were only used to improve the clarity, coherence, and academic tone of the article. All ideas, interpretations, and conclusions remain the original work and responsibility of the author involved.

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