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Challenges and Strategies for the Internationalization of Undergraduate Education in Application-Oriented Private Universities in Heilongjiang Province under the Belt and Road Initiative

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has reshaped the global education landscape by promoting cross-border collaboration, talent mobility, and educational partnerships. However, application-oriented private universities in China's border provinces like Heilongjiang face unique challenges in aligning with this international vision. This paper investigates the internationalization challenges of undergraduate education in Heilongjiang's private institutions, focusing on policy implementation gaps, insufficient language preparation, faculty limitations, and low global visibility. Drawing on case studies, expert interviews, and comparative analysis with similar institutions in Central and Eastern Europe, this study proposes a framework to enhance international engagement. Strategies include establish dedicated International Affairs units, fostering dual-degree pathways, improve language learning and cultural understanding, leveraging digital platforms, and strengthen local government support and incentives. The research offers theoretical and practical contributions to China's higher education internationalization under the BRI, and suggests policy and institutional reforms critical for transforming regional education hubs into globally connected knowledge centres.

1. Introduction

Since the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), education has become a cornerstone of China's soft power diplomacy and international collaboration. Universities are now expected to play a key role in training global talent, encouraging academic exchange, and promoting cultural understanding. While leading public universities have made progress in this area, application-oriented private universities, especially in border provinces like Heilongjiang remain on the periphery of this transformation.

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Heilongjiang, which borders Russia, has a strong geographic advantage for cross-border education under the BRI. However, private universities in the region often deal with limited resources, weak international networks, and a lack of experience in global programs. These problems affect faculty training, student exchange opportunities, curriculum development, and international visibility.

Despite these challenges, private, application-oriented universities are important for local economic development and regional talent cultivation. This paper explores the current situation, main barriers, and possible solutions for improving the internationalization of undergraduate education in these institutions. It highlights areas such as faculty support, student mobility, language training, and policy alignment, offering practical strategies to align regional education efforts with global standards under the BRI.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

BRI is the abbreviation of “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, was introduced in 2013 by the Chinese government as the core of China’s foreign policy in the new century [1]. It serves as a global infrastructure development initiative to connect China with other growing regions. The idea behind the BRI is to help countries along the route grow together by improving transport links, making trade easier, and encouraging currency use across borders. It also aims to build friendly partnerships based on trust between nations and their people. The initiative hopes to create a global platform for economic and trade cooperation that supports sharing history, culture, and knowledge; while promoting an open, inclusive, and future-focused way of working together [2]. Due to China's centralized government structure, the internationalization of higher education is mainly guided by the government. The government plays a leading role in shaping how universities in China take part in international activities, and the goals of these institutions reflects the country’s overall priorities [3]. Figure 1 shows the mapping of the BRI.

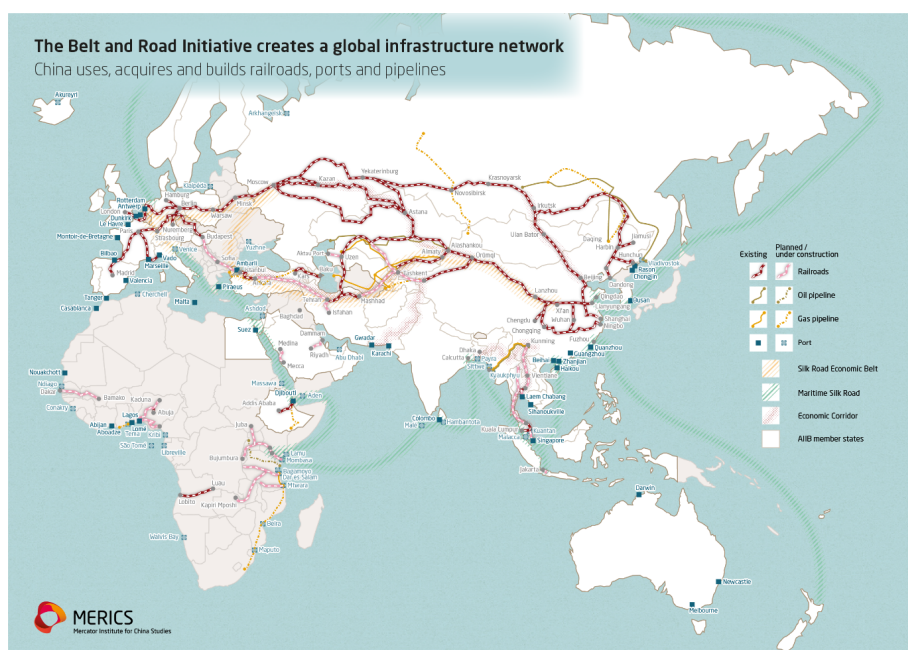


Fig. 1. Belt and Road Initiative [4]

2.2 BRI in the Internationalization of Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education has been studied in the past, especially in the context of geopolitical and globalization initiatives. Knight [5] defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of an institution. De Wit *et al.*, [6] emphasize the rise of transnational education and the importance of cross-border collaboration. Zhang [7] mentioned that at a fundamental level, the BRI is designed to share China's higher education development and reformation experience with countries along the route and to obtain common prosperity. Yue *et al.* [8] stated that higher education as a key pillar of BRI and as Chinese universities improve their global popularity, China is working hard to increase the level of higher education. It fosters knowledge sharing, talent development, and cross-cultural understanding among countries along the BRI corridors.

Ge and Ho [9] used a policy review method to explore how the BRI has influenced the focus of internationalization in three main areas: building education networks across the Six BRI Economic Corridors, promoting Chinese as an international language and involving vocational colleges in global education efforts. Baishan *et al.*, [10] noted that a BRI education network has been formed, with China signing cooperation deals with 24 countries and starting education programs in 23 of them. Additionally, 60 Chinese universities have launched international programs abroad, and 16 have set up joint research labs with global partners [10].

Wang [2] also points out that the BRI brings both opportunities and challenges to China's higher education. It helps universities bring in global knowledge and skills, but also pushes them to increase international partnerships and prepare students for a global environment. Similarly, Yao [11] mentioned that to make the most of BRI-related partnerships, China's education system must deal with problems like weak infrastructure, limited independence for institutions, and inconsistent education quality.

Past research has shown that the BRI has greatly boosted the number of international students coming to China. China is now the top destination in Asia and the third largest worldwide for international students [12]. The study also found that BRI policies have helped more students join both degree and non-degree programs in China [12]. Similarly, Xiao and Ping [13] discovered that the BRI has increased students' interest in learning across different fields. It has also encouraged collaborations between students and researchers from various cultures, leading to the sharing of ideas and the development of new technologies. However, there are still concerns about how these programs are managed. Huang [14] pointed out that there is no clear or consistent system for choosing international students, with weak standards for assessing their language skills and academic ability.

2.3 BRI in the Private Universities in China

However, most of the previous literature has focused on public universities. Application-oriented private universities especially in provinces like Heilongjiang have received less attention. Wang [2] points out that these institutions need customized policies to help them take part in China's internationalization plans, as they play a key role in supporting local development.

Border areas like Heilongjiang have a key advantage for cross-border education under the BRI because they are close to Russia and Central Asia. Still, they face several challenges, including few opportunities for teacher exchanges, outdated course structures, and weak foreign language skills. Fan and Zhang [15] argue that government leaders should better recognize the potential of these regions and offer more funding and supportive policies to help grow international education

programs. In the Chinese context, several scholars [16,17] have studied the “going-out” strategy of higher education under the BRI, noting the strong government push but uneven institutional capacity across regions. Niu [18] argue that border provinces like Heilongjiang are strategically positioned but institutionally disadvantaged due to lack of international networks and underdeveloped language and research infrastructure. They play a crucial role in regional development and talent cultivation.

In summary, more researchers are exploring the complex link between the BRI and the global development of China’s higher education. This paper fills a gap by focusing on the unique intersection of private education, regional dynamics, and the BRI.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, supported by document analysis and expert interviews, to examine the internationalization challenges and development strategies of undergraduate education in application-oriented private universities in Heilongjiang under the Belt and Road Initiative. It allows the researcher to explore the situation in depth and understand how different factors work together within a specific setting.

Three private universities in Heilongjiang were purposely chosen for this study. The selection was based on three main criteria: the university’s location within the province, its status as a private, practice-focused institution, and its involvement in international activities linked to the BRI. These universities were chosen because they represent a wider group of similar institutions in the region.

To gain a deeper understanding, the study also conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with people who have direct experience and knowledge of internationalization at these universities. The people interviewed included university administrators, international office directors, deans, and officials from the provincial education office. The interview questions focused on topics such as the readiness of faculty, are the student well-prepared, institutional support structures, and policy alignment with BRI goals. The interviews followed a guided format but allowed flexibility so that each person could share their views in detail. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. They were then transcript and made anonymous to protect the participant’s privacy. The collected data were coded and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. To strengthen the accuracy and reliability of the results, the study compared and cross-checked findings from institutional documents, expert interviews, and international examples.

In addition, a comparative review was carried out with private universities in some Central and Eastern European countries involved in the BRI, such as Poland, Hungary, and Serbia. These universities were chosen because they are similar in type and have also taken part in BRI education programs. Public documents, research articles, and university websites were used to understand how they carry out international education. This comparison helped identify useful practices, highlight differences, and give ideas that might be useful for universities in Heilongjiang.

The study followed proper ethical procedures, where all participants were told about the study’s purpose, and they were free to leave the interview at any time if they chose to. The case study approach gives detailed insights into the actions, views, and decisions of people directly involved, offering useful lessons for improving education policy and practice in similar settings.

4. Findings

The results of this research reveal several interconnected challenges that are slowing down the progress of the internationalization of undergraduate education in Heilongjiang’s application-oriented private universities. Based on the review of documents, semi-structured interviews with key

staffs, and a comparison with universities in other BRI countries, five main problem areas were identified. These findings suggest that a multi-level, systemic approach is needed to bridge the gap between national strategy and institutional readiness.

4.1 Lack of Clear Institutional Strategy

One of the biggest problems is that many universities do not have a clear or long-term plan for international development. Most of the international activities are isolated efforts that occurs when they have support or if funding is available. These projects are not deeply connected to the universities' overall missions or long-term goals. As a result, internationalization remains scattered and lack of direction.

4.2 Limited Language and Cultural Skills

Another major issue is the lack of strong language and cultural skills among both students and faculty. English and Russian are not commonly used, which both languages are important for engagement with other BRI partner countries. Although some universities offer language training, the programs are basic and not enough to meet international standards. This language barrier not only limits their participation in international programs, but it also affects the staffs and students' confidence in engaging with global opportunities.

4.3 Faculty Limitations in International Engagement

The third challenge is related to the academic staff. Most of them in these universities have limited overseas academic experience, engage with international research teams, or joint curriculum development. The limited funding and a lack of motivation or rewards causes academic staff from getting involved in international programs. In addition, the limitation of strong network with foreign universities makes it difficult invite professors from other countries to visit or even start new global research projects.

4.4 Weak Global Visibility and Branding

Another barrier is that these universities are not well known internationally. Unlike top public universities, these private institutions rarely seen in global rankings or international academic events. This is the reason why these universities found it hard to attract foreign students or form partnerships with universities abroad. The lack of skills and funding needed limits them from improving their global image or to promote themselves internationally.

4.5 Policy-Implementation Disconnection

The last major issue is a mismatch between national BRI policies and local-level implementation. They face problems such as accessing sustained support, navigating regulatory complexity, and translating policy rhetoric into practical and unclear funding rules. They need assistance from the provincial government and better coordination with policy-makers for local level implementation.

5. Significance and Impacts

This study provides timely and practical contributions to the discourse on regional higher education development in the context of internationalization.

At the policy level, the findings highlight the need for provincial governments to craft localized internationalization policies that complement national BRI objectives. National and provincial education authorities often apply the same internationalization plan to all universities, which may not work well for private institutions in developing areas. Tailored support mechanisms, such as funding schemes for faculty mobility, institutional twinning, and international curriculum co-development, are essential to empower private institutions as active global actors. For instance, provincial government can introduce specific programs such as financial assistance for overseas cooperation, teacher training sessions, and rewards for international partnerships.

For institutional leaders, the study offers a strategic roadmap to recalibrate their development priorities, emphasizing multilingual training such as adding English, Russian, or other relevant languages to the curriculum, cross-border program design, and digital engagement with international partners. These steps are realistic and can be adjusted depending on the size and resources of each university.

The implications of this research extend beyond the educational sector. By fostering globally competent graduates and deepening academic linkages with BRI countries, application-oriented private universities in Heilongjiang can play a critical role in advancing soft diplomacy, regional integration, and socio-economic development. Moreover, by elevating lesser-known, non-elite universities into the internationalization conversation, this research contributes to more equitable and inclusive global education ecosystems, which are vital for sustainable growth and intercultural understanding in the evolving landscape of higher education.

6. Recommendations

To address the challenges identified and align institutional efforts with the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative, this study proposes several strategic recommendations. These recommendations are meant to be practical, flexible, and suitable for universities with limited resources and regional constraints. These measures can cultivate globally competent graduates, enhance institutional resilience, and position Heilongjiang's private universities as vital contributors to China's educational diplomacy and regional development under the Belt and Road framework.

6.1 Establish Dedicated International Affairs Units

First, universities should build or expanding specialized offices that focus on international programs and partnerships, especially those related to BRI. These offices should not only manage exchange programs but also actively seek for new opportunities to partner with universities and institutions in BRI countries. This unit should be staffed with members with professional training in international education, fluent in relevant language, and strong communication skills. A dedicated team with the right can ensure that the international activities are well-organized, long-lasting, and in line with both the university's development goals and BRI policy directions.

6.2 Improve Language Learning and Cultural Understanding

Second, universities need to strengthen their language education programs, especially in English, Russian, and other languages commonly used in BRI countries. These language programs should be part of the regular curriculum. In addition, it should be paired with training in cultural awareness to prepare students and staff to work with people from different backgrounds. Short-term exchange programs, language workshops, and culture-related activities will can help build the confidence and skills necessary for global engagement. Students will be more competitive for overseas study and work opportunities and better equipped to participate in cross-border programs.

6.3 Develop Joint Programs and Dual Degrees

Third, private universities should work with foreign institutions to set up joint degree programs and dual-degree partnerships, especially with universities in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. These programs should include co-teaching, shared certification and curriculum alignment that allowing students to earn credentials recognized both in China and the partner country. Such partnerships give students valuable international learning experiences and help the universities involved in building stronger reputations. They also serve as a good starting point for further cooperation in research and academic exchange.

6.4 Promote Faculty Development for International Engagement

Fourth, the growth of international programs depends heavily on faculty members. Universities should provide funding and support for academic staff to attend global conferences, engage with international research collaborations, and attending overseas training. Local training sessions should also be organized to help academic staffs in bilingual teaching, design international courses, and publish in international journals. These efforts will help create a culture of global engagement, which benefits students and raises the university's international profile.

6.5 Leverage Digital Tools for Global Outreach

Fifth, digital platforms should be used more effectively to support internationalization. Virtual exchanges programs, online co-teaching, and participation in international competitions allow universities to reach global audiences even with limited budgets. Having a strong and easy-to-navigate website in multiple languages is essential in promoting the university to international students and partners. Besides, tools like webinars, international student forums, and virtual open day can also be used to promote the university's programs and strengthen its global reputation.

6.6 Strengthen Local Government Support and Incentives

Lastly, the provincial education authorities should be active in helping the internationalization of local universities. This includes offering special funds for global projects, offering mobility grants for students and faculty. Recognizing universities that make progress through rankings or awards can also serve as a strong incentive. Policies that are clear, easy to apply, and relevant to local needs will help turn the BRI's education goals into practical results.

7. Conclusion

This research offers valuable insights about how application-focused private universities in China's border areas, with a focus on Heilongjiang Province can take part in international education under BRI. By identifying key challenges these universities face such as the lack of clear institutional strategy, limited language and cultural skills, faculty limitations in international engagement, weak global visibility and policy-implementation disconnection, the study offers a full picture of the constraints that affects their global development.

At the same time, the findings highlighted that these institutions have the potential to grow internationally provided that the right support and changes are introduced. The study suggests clear and practical steps, including setting up international affairs units, adding language and culture-focused programs, develop joint programs and dual degrees, and using digital tools for global outreach. This research outlines actionable strategies for institutions to build global capacity in realistic ways.

This paper contributes to the Innovation in Learning and Education track by demonstrating how localized institutions can respond to global challenges through specific strategies that match their situation. It emphasizes the importance of institutional adaptability, proactive leadership, and multi-level policy alignment in enabling internationalization. The case of Heilongjiang's private universities serves as a model for other border regions in China and similar contexts worldwide, showing that internationalization is possible even with limited resources. Overall, the recommendations described help to create inclusive and sustainable global education systems. These efforts also support the broader goals of the BRI, which include shared development, better cultural understanding, and stronger ties between countries through education. As China continues to expand in global higher education, it is important that to include all institutions from different region in this transformation. This research contributes to that goal by offering both a realistic assessment of current limitations and a roadmap for future progress in international education.

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