

Discussion on the Operation and Management of International Offices in Domestic Universities under the Vision of Educational Leadership

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Abstract: Higher education opening-up has been accelerating in recent years. As the department responsible for foreign-related affairs in universities, how well international offices operate directly affects the quality of a university's internationalization. This article starts from the theoretical perspective of educational leadership, combined with the actual situation of domestic universities, and summarizes the practical difficulties encountered by international offices from three aspects: staffing, performance evaluation, and digital transformation. Empirical research has shown that transformational leadership has a significant positive impact on organizational performance in universities, and the improvement of educational leadership can effectively drive the improvement of management effectiveness, providing a theoretical framework for improving effectiveness in international affairs management. According to publicly available data from the Ministry of Education, as of 2024, China has established educational cooperation relationships with 183 countries and regions, and received over 500,000 students studying in China throughout the year. The contradiction between scale expansion and lagging management capabilities is gradually becoming apparent. Based on the practices of more than ten universities, this article also proposes several specific optimization ideas for reference by universities.

Keywords: Educational leadership; University internationalization; Operations management; International cooperation and exchange; Opening up of higher education to the outside world.

1. Introduction

Opening up education to the outside world is a key driver for developing a world-class education system and enhancing the international competitiveness of higher education [1]. As of 2024, China has established educational cooperation relationships with 183 countries and regions, signed mutual recognition agreements for academic degrees and diplomas with 59 countries and regions, and received over 500,000 students studying in China throughout the year, a year-on-year increase of 12.3%. Since the 2018 National Education Conference, the Ministry of Education has approved the establishment of 473 Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions and projects at the undergraduate and above levels, covering 346 domestic universities and 420 universities in 34 countries and regions overseas. The International Cooperation and Exchange Office carries out national foreign affairs policies and coordinates all international work in the university, such as Sino-foreign cooperative education, cross-border mobility of faculty and students, international academic exchanges, international student administration, and foreign expert recruitment.

As the scale of international cooperation increases, so too has the requirement for management capacity; at present, this demand far outstrips supply. Based on the publicly available departmental information of various universities, the staffing of international departments in domestic universities mostly ranges from 10 to 25 people, but they need to connect with hundreds of overseas partner universities and handle thousands of cross-border flow affairs every year. The traditional administrative management model is gradually showing signs of being unsuitable in response to the increasingly complex international education environment, and work efficiency and service quality are difficult to

improve synchronously. In the past decade, the internationalization literacy of university leadership has significantly improved. Studies have shown that the proportion of major leaders in "Double First-Class" universities with overseas research or study experience has shown a significant upward trend from 2013 to 2023. The expansion of management's international perspective has created favorable conditions for the reform of the operation mechanism of international offices. This article attempts to discuss how to optimize the operation and management of international offices in domestic universities from the perspective of educational leadership, hoping to provide some practical reference for the high-quality development of internationalization in universities.

2. The Organizational Structure and Operational Status of International Offices in Domestic Universities

From the publicly available departmental information of various universities, the organizational structure and operational mode of international offices in domestic universities have both similarities and differences due to the size and positioning of the schools. International offices in Chinese universities generally adopt a three-tier structure of "division-section-post". Staff size varies directly with the university's administrative tier and enrollment scale. The full-time management personnel of the International Cooperation and Exchange Office of comprehensive universities are generally 15 to 25 people, while 8 to 12 people are more common in local undergraduate colleges.

For example, Guangxi University of Science and Technology uses a combined office model. Most local universities house the international affairs, Hong Kong-

Macao-Taiwan relations and international education departments in a single shared office, which generally has about 25 staff members in total. The international office of Jinggangshan University has ten staff members in five sub-units. This structure keeps the administrative costs low but often has vague responsibilities and uneven workloads.

These offices are responsible for all the main work: general administration, exit and entry procedures, partnership programmes, international student services, foreign expert management and Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan exchanges. Three deputy directors of the university are responsible for the areas of overseas study, international cooperation and cross-border mobility of teachers and students, respectively. Central South University organises its international office as two parallel, independent divisions.

Double First-Class institutions are more likely to adopt a specialised division of labour for detailed daily operations; however, such an arrangement often results in information silos and weak cross-departmental cooperation. Observations of the public operation of various universities show that there is a high cost for cross-departmental collaboration and communication; at the same time, situations such as overlapping responsibilities or management gaps in project promotion frequently occur [2].

The director takes overall responsibility, which is the standard model, and major matters need to be reported to the school's foreign affairs work leadership group for approval. In daily operation, document circulation and approval signatures are still mostly done offline. Enrollment and admission are more obvious, and the combination of paper materials and electronic forms is the standard practice for most universities.

The exploration of two-level management between schools and colleges has already been carried out by universities. Xi'an Peihua College offers a particularly interesting example. Each secondary college has an international development specialist, and together they form a school-wide work network. The effectiveness of international work is directly included in the annual performance evaluation of each department, forming a three-level linkage pattern of "university-college-program". The enthusiasm of secondary colleges has been mobilized, but the pressure of overall coordination at the school level has also increased. At this point, the systematic thinking and resource integration ability of educational managers become particularly important [3].

3. The Mechanism of Educational Leadership on the Efficiency of International Office Management

Building on the organizational structure and operational patterns outlined above, this section examines the mechanisms through which educational leadership shapes management effectiveness. The topic of educational leadership has drawn growing interest in Chinese academic circles over the past decade, as higher education governance reform has advanced. As the central unit handling foreign-related affairs in universities, international offices' operational efficiency depends heavily on the quality of educational leadership [4]. Research on domestic university management shows that there is a clear positive correlation between the transformational leadership of deans and the level of internationalization development of the school. The management philosophy, leadership style, and behavior

patterns of managers directly determine the strategic positioning of the international office and also affect the efficiency of various foreign-related affairs. The empirical research of Chongqing University also confirms that transformational leadership has a significant effect on improving organizational operational efficiency, and this conclusion also applies to the field of international management.

Transformational leadership operates across three core dimensions. University leaders with global vision articulate a clear internationalization strategy, driving international exchange units to transition from administrative service providers to strategic support bodies—the core of inspirational motivation.

Lanzhou University is a typical case. After the Party Congress, the university established a special leading group, issued supporting policies and used regular work mechanisms to implement the strategy. The top-level Design specifies the working goals and provides policy- and resource-support for implementation.

Intellectual Stimulation and Individual Consideration can help the team work better by fostering creativity and a sense of belonging.

Distributed Leadership is another mode of management for change. Decentralized, shared power is used to boost the life of the organisation through wide-ranging staff participation. The authority to approve has been distributed; frontline staff are now part of the strategic consultation group; and cross-departmental cooperation platforms have been established in practice.

The Jiangsu-Hong Kong-Macao University Cooperation Alliance, started by Nanjing University and now including 45 member institutions, is a typical case of this cross-organizational application [5].

Delegation is not free-form. An organised system of institutions and divisions of responsibility needs to be established for the implementation of distributed leadership; otherwise, there will be management disorder.

4. The Main Challenges Faced by Current International Office Operation and Management

Staff capacity has not increased at the same rate as the expansion of overseas operations and is now a drag on efficiency improvements. Staffing data released by universities show that most of the international office staff are graduates of foreign language programs, and very few have degrees in education, management or law [6]. This uneven staff distribution is leading to more routine transaction-oriented work in the office, and they are ill-equipped for specialised tasks such as overseas education policy analysis, joint project assessment, and cross-border risk prevention.

Nantong University is a typical case: Its international office has supported 48 long-term foreign experts, half of whom hold doctorates and 75% of whom are full-time subject faculty. There is a considerable gap in the professional knowledge of the administrative staff and the experts they support; thus, communication problems have occurred and management has been off-track.

The second problem is that the performance appraisal system does not fit the characteristics of work in foreign affairs. Most universities still use the traditional five-in-one evaluation system of morality, ability, diligence, results and

integrity, and have not introduced quantitative indicators for foreign-language-based work. Zhengzhou University has constructed a reasonably strong system of international education evaluation, but it mainly covers academic schools and departments, and the assessment framework for the international office itself is still lacking.

Many of the granular indicators in the industry, such as partnership agreement activation rates, partner response times and entry-exit procedure compliance rates, have not been applied by most universities in China. Without specific incentives and a clear career path, the staff will lose the will to live [7].

Slow Digitalisation of Operations also reduces efficiency. Most university international offices are still in the early stages of digitalisation and use separate business systems without cross-platform data sharing. The main processes, such as applications for overseas study and research, hiring of foreign faculty and management of international students and partnerships, are still done manually and are prone to errors. The user base of the National Smart Education Public Service Platform has exceeded 178 million, covering more than 200 countries and regions. There is a significant gap in the level of digitalization in international management within universities. By 2025, Zhejiang University of Media and Communications will have 1,431 students going abroad for exchange programs, 340 full-time teachers visiting overseas for medium-to-long-term studies, nearly 50 foreign experts hired for both short- and long-term appointments, and 796 international students trained. Without efficient information technology support, the management costs and risks of such large-scale cross-border flows will continue to rise. The pressure of cross-border risk prevention and control brought about by changes in the international situation continues to increase, and most international offices of universities have not yet established a sound risk early warning and emergency response mechanism.

5. Optimization Path of Operations Management Based on Educational Leadership

These three challenges can be addressed at three levels, drawing on the mechanisms of educational leadership. At the strategic level, it is necessary to strengthen strategic leadership and build a flatter organizational structure. School leaders should incorporate international development into the core strategy of the school, enhance the status of the international office, and give it more decision-making power. The school may consider establishing an internationalization work committee, which will be directly managed by school leaders, to promote the transformation of the international department from an executive department to a comprehensive management department with both planning and policy-making functions. In terms of organizational structure design, streamline management hierarchies, broaden spans of control, and shorten information chains. Large comprehensive universities can look to build an “integrated foreign affairs” governance framework [8]. They can streamline overlapping functions across international student education, Sino-foreign cooperative programs and foreign expert administration to reduce efficiency losses from institutional duplication. Yantai University has adopted this centralized model to boost two-way mobility. Its Sino-foreign cooperative programs enrolled 593 new students in 2025, bringing total on-campus

enrollment to 2,258. These figures reflect the practical value of functional consolidation.

Distributed leadership works best with smooth university-college coordination. University administrators can delegate authority and empower college-level teams to promote the initiative of secondary colleges in internationalisation. Xi'an Peihua University appoints full-time or part-time international development officers at all secondary colleges. These officers form a campus-wide work network and have devolved project execution authority to the front-line college units.

The university's international office plans strategically, formulates policies, coordinates resources and supervises quality. Routine project coordination and execution will be handled by the secondary college, and centralised direction will be combined with college-level operational autonomy. Hold regular cross-departmental meetings to coordinate the work of the international office with academics, HR and finance. Zhengzhou University has built an all-encompassing institutional system. It has issued policies for the management of foreign faculty and amended the regulations on official overseas travel to provide strong institutional support for university-college cooperation.

Finally, professional leadership and talent team building need to keep up. International office staff should not only be proficient in foreign languages, but also have expertise in international education policies, cross-border project management, cross-cultural communication, and foreign-related laws [9]. Universities should establish a systematic training system, regularly organize policy interpretation, business skills, and leadership training, and support staff to exchange and learn at high-level universities at home and abroad. When recruiting, pay attention to diversified professional backgrounds and appropriately introduce talents with overseas university management experience, international organization work experience, or relevant professional doctoral degrees. In addition, it is necessary to plan a clear career development path for the staff, with dual career paths for both management and professional/technical tracks, to avoid the career ceiling effect.

6. Management Innovation Direction under the Background of Digital Transformation

In addition to the three paths mentioned above, there is another direction worth mentioning separately - digital transformation. This is not only the direction of management innovation, but also the technical support for improving management efficiency. Digital governance and integrated information platforms are key priorities. Based on the author's observations of local universities, investment in IT infrastructure for international offices is generally insufficient, and many are still in the manual operation stage of Excel and email [10]. Universities need to increase investment in developing a comprehensive management system that integrates five modules: cross-border student mobility, foreign teacher services, cooperation project tracking, full-cycle management of international students, and data statistical analysis, to break down data silos. The five first-tier functions of the campus digital management system are online applications, intelligent approvals, progress tracking, risk alarms and automatic report generation; they reduce manual labour. The National Smart Education Platform has

more than 178 million users in over 200 countries and areas. The architecture can be used to connect the campus system with the national platform for data sharing and cooperation.

Optimisation of the assessment system must be in line with digitalisation. A Data-Driven Performance System Realizes the Practical Value of Campus Informatization. Universities can construct an internationalisation assessment system based on five kinds of indices, such as the quality of cooperation agreements and outcomes in training for foreign students.

Zhengzhou University has built a foundation assessment system. Add a process indicator of agreement activation rate for finer-grained evaluation. Based on the assessment results, adjust the departmental budget, staff compensation and titles, etc., in a closed-loop manner. Universities adjust the weights of the indicators each year to promote quality improvement over scale expansion in internationalisation.

Digital Tools Provide Concrete Support for Cross-border Risk Management. Build a high-quality risk-control system and emergency-response capacity for the international-relations office of a university. The university can comprehensively monitor the full cycle of cross-border activities and projects, and the indicators will cover political security, compliance and reputation risk.

Wuhan Technology and Business University's special international student emergency plan and department-wise lead groups in the campus serve as good references for other institutions. Universities can set up a regular information-sharing channel with the foreign affairs and public security departments to form a joint-response network [11].

Digital Technology will be used for real-time risk monitoring and institutional rules of daily operations. Together, they will help manage all kinds of foreign-related risks reasonably.

7. Conclusion

Educational leadership reform of the university's internationalisation office is thus a multi-faceted undertaking that spans educational philosophy, organisation structure, team development, technology, and institutional design, rather than just improving departmental efficiency. Based on data and cases from more than ten universities published by the Ministry of Education, this paper applies educational leadership theory to investigate the office structure, operation, and practical problems of these offices, and then proposes targeted improvement directions. Based on the above cases, efficiency gains are best achieved when the top-level strategy and grassroots participation work together to provide support, and transformational and distributed leadership can work together to achieve this.

That said, this study has limitations. The selected samples are mostly from provincial and local universities, and there is not enough attention paid to "Double First-Class" universities and vocational colleges. Whether the findings are generalizable requires further empirical validation. Due to limitations in data acquisition conditions, the evaluation of management effectiveness in this study is mainly based on qualitative judgments, and a quantifiable evaluation model has not yet been constructed, which is also the focus of future research.

Looking ahead, several changes are likely to emerge in the development of international offices in domestic universities: the work positioning will shift from transactional execution

to strategic planning, the operation mode will shift from individual efforts to university-college collaboration, and the decision-making mode will shift from experience-driven to data-driven. University administrators should apply the concept of educational leadership to position the international office as a strategic pillar for the school's opening up to the outside world. In practice, it is important to both absorb mature international practices and ground efforts in the development stage of higher education in China and the characteristics of each school, and develop a model of university international management suited to China's context. As education opening-up continues to deepen, international offices will play an increasingly significant role in developing a world-class education system.

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