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Navigating Two Worlds of Quality: A Contextualized Assessment Model for Sino-Foreign Joint Programs

(Mengemudi Dua Dunia Kualiti: Model Penilaian Kontekstual bagi Program Usahasama Sino-Asing)

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of International Joint Programs (IJPs) in China creates a systemic clash between the centralized, input-driven quality assurance (QA) of Chinese universities and the outcome-oriented standards of international partners. This study aims to bridge this divergence by developing and proposing a contextually relevant quality assessment framework. Employing a qualitative multi-case study design, data were collected from 18 expert stakeholders across three distinct Chinese universities and their Anglophone partners via semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis within a Design and Development Research framework. The findings reveal a persistent "two worlds" friction leading to reactive curriculum development. In response, the study proposes the CTAFRIS Model, a seven-component framework comprising Curriculum, Teaching, Assessment, Faculty, Resources, Internationalization, and Student Support. The study concludes that while systemic friction is deep-seated, a structured bridging mechanism allows for genuine co-creation. The implications suggest that integrating this model fosters proactive collaboration, mitigates reputational risks, and establishes the perceived conditions necessary for sustainable quality improvement in transnational education.

Key Words: International Joint Programs; Quality Assurance; Sino-foreign Cooperative Education; Transnational Education; Quality Assessment Model

ABSTRAK

Pengembangan pesat Program Usahasama Antarabangsa (IJP) di China mewujudkan pertembungan sistemik antara jaminan kualiti (QA) universiti China yang berpusat dan didorong oleh input dengan standard berorientasikan hasil rakan kongsi antarabangsa. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk merapatkan jurang perbezaan ini dengan membangunkan dan mencadangkan satu kerangka penilaian kualiti yang relevan secara kontekstual. Menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kes berbilang kualitatif, data dikumpul daripada 18 pihak berkepentingan pakar di tiga universiti China yang berbeza serta rakan kongsi Anglofon mereka melalui temu bual separa berstruktur dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik refleksif dalam kerangka Penyelidikan Reka Bentuk dan Pembangunan. Dapatan kajian mendedahkan geseran "dua dunia" yang berterusan yang membawa kepada pembangunan kurikulum yang bersifat reaktif. Sebagai tindak balas, kajian ini mencadangkan Model CTAFRIS, satu kerangka tujuh komponen yang terdiri daripada Kurikulum, Pengajaran, Penilaian, Fakulti, Sumber, Pengantarabangsaan, dan Sokongan Pelajar. Kajian ini merumuskan bahawa walaupun geseran sistemik tersebut berakar umbi, mekanisme penghubung berstruktur membolehkan penciptaan bersama yang tulen. Implikasi kajian mencadangkan bahawa pengintegrasian model ini memupuk kerjasama proaktif, mengurangkan risiko reputasi, dan menetapkan keadaan yang dianggap perlu untuk penambahbaikan kualiti yang mampan dalam pendidikan transnasional.

Kata Kunci: Program Usahasama Antarabangsa; Jaminan Kualiti; Pendidikan Kerjasama Sino-Asing; Pendidikan Transnasional; Model Penilaian Kualiti

INTRODUCTION

As higher education institutions globally embrace internationalization, International Joint Programs (IJPs) have become a prominent strategy, particularly within China's rapidly expanding system (Wen 2022; Zhang et al. 2022). These collaborative initiatives are designed to offer students unique cross-cultural experiences alongside globally recognized qualifications (Tran et al. 2023). The growth of these programs in China has been deeply intertwined with the country's socio-political transformation and its "opening up" reforms. What began as small-scale exploratory partnerships in the 1970s has evolved into a diverse landscape of dual-degree and joint research initiatives today (Jiang & Shi 2019; Yang 2023).

This expansion has been driven by government policies such as the "Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools" and sustained student demand for global employability (Cheng et al. 2024; Sun & Chen 2022). Consequently, IJPs now constitute a significant component of the Chinese higher education landscape. However, this burgeoning growth has exposed a critical challenge: the need to ensure that these programs do not merely scale up in quantity but also withstand rigorous scrutiny in terms of academic quality (Li & Xue 2022).

Despite the strategic importance of IJPs, a critical gap persists in the mechanisms used to assure their quality. The rapid expansion of these collaborations has outpaced the development of robust quality assurance (QA) frameworks tailored to the unique complexities of cross-border education (Paniagua et al. 2022). The core problem lies in the profound divergence between the localized quality standards of Chinese universities and the diverse expectations of their international partners, particularly those in the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada (Zadayeva et al. 2024).

This divergence creates a systemic alignment bottleneck during the curriculum development process. Current practices in Chinese universities often prioritize alignment with internal guidelines and national standards. While this effectively addresses domestic compliance, it frequently fails to fulfill the specific programmatic requirements of partner institutions (Shang & Ling 2024). The result is often a reactive "pre-validation" phase where international partners are engaged late in the process, leading to curricula that function as compromises rather than integrated, co-created collaborations (Wei 2023).

Furthermore, existing generic quality models, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) or Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), are insufficient for this specific context (Susilowati 2025; González Ferreras & Wagenaar 2023). While providing sound general principles, these generic models lack the specific mechanisms required to navigate the tension between China's centralized, input-focused regulatory system and the decentralized, outcome-oriented frameworks of Western partners (Zhang et al. 2022). Existing literature remains fragmented. Studies frequently explore student mobility or general management (Tsui 2022), yet there is a notable lack of comprehensive comparative analysis required to develop a model that can successfully bridge these different national systems (Mion 2022).

The significance of addressing this gap is profound. Failure to bridge divergent standards carries severe consequences, including the devaluation of student qualifications, limitations on global mobility, and significant reputational damage to the participating institutions (Liu 2021). Therefore, there is an urgent need for a contextually relevant quality assessment model that functions as a bridging mechanism to ensure transparency and alignment from the outset of the partnership.

To address this critical gap, this study aims to develop and propose a comprehensive quality assessment model, namely the CTAFRIS Model, specifically tailored for IJP curricula at Chinese universities. This research moves beyond generic QA principles to construct a framework that harmonizes the input-based requirements of the Chinese context with the outcome-based expectations of international partners.

This study is guided by the following three consolidated research questions:

1. How do the divergent quality assurance frameworks of Chinese universities and their international partners create friction in the IJP curriculum development process?
2. What are the essential components of a contextually relevant quality assessment model designed to bridge these divergent standards?
3. What are the perceived conditions necessary for this model to be sustainably integrated into institutional processes to mitigate non-compliance risks and foster continuous improvement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

QUALITY ASSESSMENT MODELS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The pursuit of quality in higher education has driven the adoption of various assessment models, yet a critical review reveals their limitations when applied to the specific context of Sino-foreign IJPs. TQM, grounded in systems thinking (Deming 1986), emphasizes continuous improvement and the creation of a "culture of quality" (Asif et al. 2013; Susilowati 2025). While influential, TQM's tendency toward standardization and its simplistic definition of the

student as a "customer" often clash with the complex, multi-stakeholder dynamics of international partnerships where academic values must balance market pressures. Similarly, OBE, which centers on the principle of constructive alignment and clearly defined learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang 2011; González Ferreras & Wagenaar 2023), provides a robust pedagogical framework. However, OBE assumes a unified educational philosophy and lacks specific mechanisms for negotiating outcomes between partners who may hold fundamentally different views on pedagogy and assessment.

Other established models such as Academic Program Review (APR) and Programmatic Accreditation offer rigorous, systematic evaluation processes (Ngoatle et al. 2022; Salto 2022). Yet, these frameworks are typically designed for single-nation contexts and can be prohibitively resource-intensive or overly rigid when applied to cross-border collaborations (Hoare et al. 2022). While regional frameworks like the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) in Europe offer successful models for joint programs, they operate within a region of relatively harmonized systems (ECA 2025; Zenkienė 2024). Consequently, there remains a significant lack of an integrated framework capable of bridging the specific "input-versus-outcome" divide inherent in Sino-foreign collaborations, where the systemic distance is far greater.

THE DIVERGENT LANDSCAPES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

A central challenge in IJP development is the profound divergence between the QA frameworks of Chinese universities and their international partners. Partner universities in the West generally operate within decentralized, outcome-oriented systems (Mion 2022). In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) emphasizes alignment with national frameworks and utilizes external examiners to ensure the comparability of standards across institutions (QAA 2023; Munna et al. 2025). The United States relies on a decentralized system of accreditation that focuses on institutional effectiveness and demonstrable student learning outcomes (CHEA 2023; Pavlakis & Kelley 2022). Similarly, Australia's TEQSA framework prioritizes rigorous compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) and the attainment of graduate attributes (TEQSA 2022), while Canada's provincial systems emphasize learning outcomes and comprehensive student support (CMEC 2007; Carvalho et al. 2025). Despite national variations, these Western systems share a common orientation toward institutional autonomy and the use of outcome-based evidence to demonstrate quality.

In stark contrast, China's QA system is characterized by high centralization and a historical focus on inputs. While recent reforms have introduced outcome-based elements, the system remains primarily driven by compliance with Ministry of Education (MoE) standards (Wang 2023; Zhang et al. 2022). These standards traditionally prioritize inputs such as faculty qualifications, resource allocation, and adherence to standardized procedures. This centralized approach is rooted in a cultural context of high power distance and a Confucian heritage that emphasizes state-led development. As noted by Ma & Tao (2022), this creates a structural tension with the autonomy-driven models of international partners, often forcing Chinese universities to navigate two contradictory sets of expectations regarding governance and quality evidence.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND ALIGNMENT

The literature on curriculum development for IJPs highlights the difficulty of aligning these divergent systems. Theoretical frameworks like Understanding by Design (UbD) (Wiggins & McTighe 2005) and the Collaborative Curriculum Design Model (Healey et al. 2013; Pieters et al. 2019) advocate for backward design and joint planning. These models suggest that effective curricula should be co-created to reflect the strengths of both partners. However, empirical studies in the Chinese context reveal that the development process is often "front-loaded" with internal compliance checks. Chinese universities frequently engage international partners only at the validation stage rather than as co-creators from the outset (Zhang et al. 2022; Reiffenrath & Thielsch 2022). This reactive approach hinders the creation of what Whitchurch (2008) terms a "curricular third space", a hybrid environment where new pedagogical forms can emerge, and instead often results in friction, misalignment, and missed opportunities for genuine collaboration (Kligyte et al. 2019; Kepe 2022).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review reveals a fragmented landscape: general QA models lack cross-border specificity, while IJP literature often describes challenges without offering structured assessment solutions. To address this, a conceptual framework was established to guide the empirical inquiry. This framework synthesizes the "input" requirements of the Chinese context with the "outcome" priorities of international partners, organized around seven interconnected domains grounded in educational theory. The structure and theoretical interconnectedness of these seven domains are visually represented in Figure 1, which served as the roadmap for the data collection.

The framework's academic core, i.e. Curriculum

Design, Teaching and Learning, and Assessment and Evaluation, is theoretically grounded in the principle of Constructive Alignment (Biggs & Tang 2011; Ali 2019). In the IJP context, this requires a curriculum that is coherent and aligned with national qualification frameworks (Frost & Ackrill 2025). It demands teaching strategies that bridge diverse pedagogical cultures through active learning (Manandhar 2024) and assessment methods that are authentic and rigorous (Sun et al. 2024).

Recognizing that academic goals cannot be achieved without structural support, the framework includes Faculty Expertise and Program Resources. Drawing on Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978; Kohtamäki 2024), this dimension acknowledges that IJPs are uniquely vulnerable to resource asymmetries. Therefore, the framework assesses not just academic credentials, but intercultural competence (Mehrara et al. 2022). Similarly, resources are evaluated by their capacity to ensure the long-term sustainability of the partnership (Khalid & Farid 2025).

Finally, to address the unique value proposition of transnational education, the framework includes Internationalization and Student Support. Grounded in Internationalization of the Curriculum theory (Knight 2004; Udekwe & Obadire 2024; Lei 2023), this component asserts that quality is defined by the integration of global perspectives (Qi 2024). Furthermore, drawing on Student Development Theory (Chickering & Reisser 1993; Duran et al. 2024), the framework posits that Student Support, encompassing academic, social, and cultural integration, is essential for mitigating the risks of studying in a cross-cultural environment (Kahar et al. 2024). This multi-dimensional framework serves as the preliminary map for this study, guiding the investigation into how these theoretical domains interact with the practical realities of Sino-foreign collaboration.

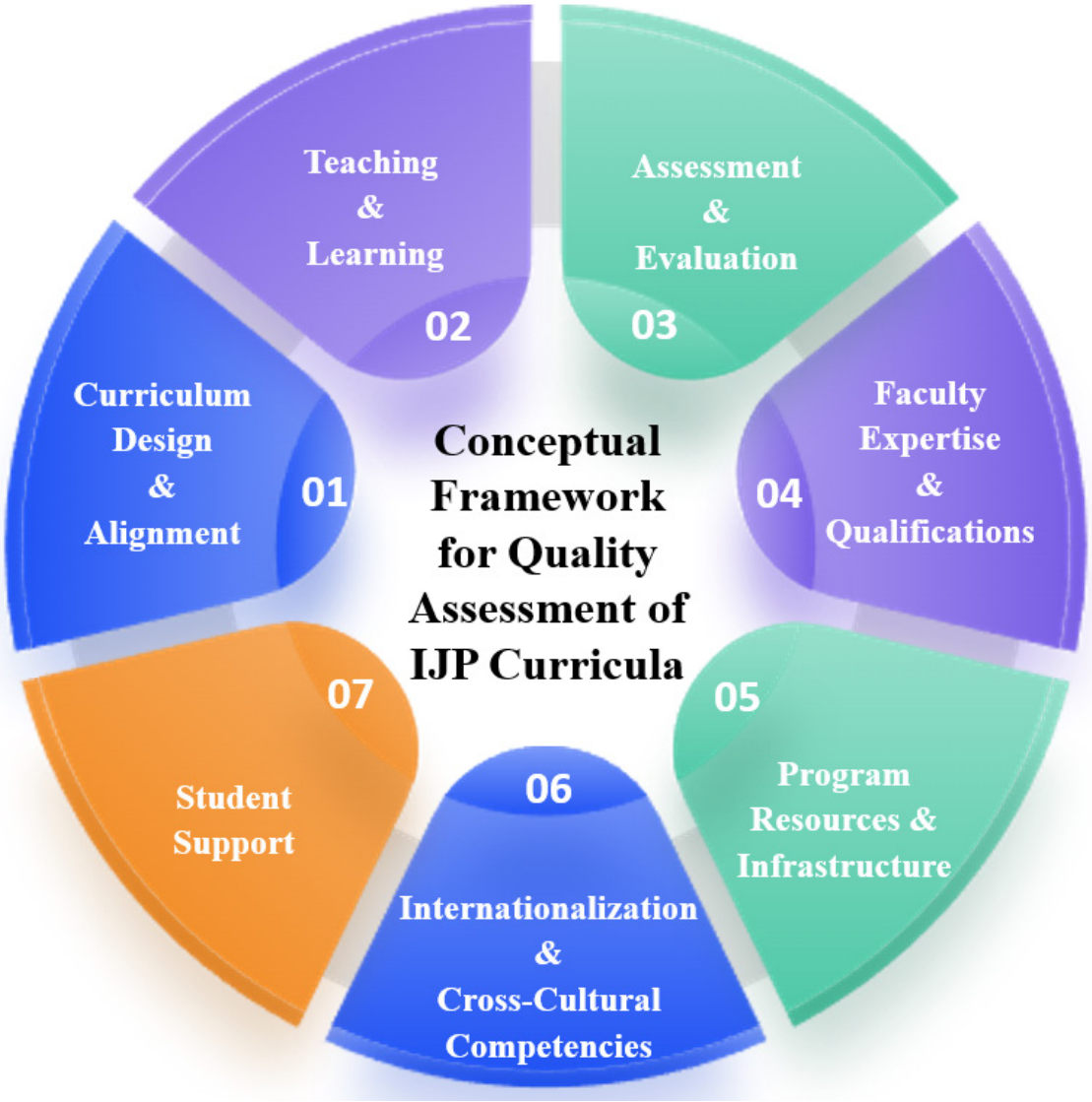


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Framework for Quality Assessment of IJP Curricula.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative multi-case study design (Yin 2018; Halkias et al. 2022). A collective case study approach was utilized to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context across several instrumental cases (Stake 2006; Nair et al. 2023). This design was selected because IJP curriculum development is deeply embedded in specific institutional cultures and regulatory environments, rendering quantitative approaches insufficient for capturing such nuances. The research procedure followed a replication logic: a comprehensive within-case analysis was conducted for each participating university, followed by a systematic cross-case analysis to identify transcendent themes (Creswell & Poth 2024). This empirical process was structured by the principles of Design and Development Research (DDR) (Richey & Klein 2014; Afriani et al. 2025), with the objective to iteratively develop and propose a quality assessment model based on the identified needs of the cases.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

In qualitative research, particularly reflexive thematic analysis, it is necessary to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and its potential influence on data interpretation (Braun & Clarke 2021). The primary researcher in this study holds more than 15 years of experience in teaching and overseeing various international degree programs in Business and Management at both Chinese and overseas higher education institutions. While this extensive insider knowledge provided valuable access and a deep understanding of the operational realities of Sino-foreign collaborations, it also introduced the potential for experiential bias. To manage this, rigorous reflexive practices were implemented throughout the research process. The researcher maintained a continuous reflexive journal and engaged in analytical memoing to critically examine their own assumptions, ensuring that the development of themes remained firmly grounded in the participants' voices and the document data rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

RESEARCH SAMPLE AND ACCESS NEGOTIATION

The population of interest for this study comprised higher education stakeholders with direct and significant involvement in the development, management, and quality assurance of Sino-foreign IJPs. The study sample consisted of three distinct Chinese universities and eighteen individual key informants. The three universities were selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy (Palinkas et al. 2015; Stratton 2024) to capture a diverse range of institutional contexts, enhancing the transferability of findings: University A (a large, coastal comprehensive institution with long-standing IJPs), University B (a smaller, specialized inland university with limited resources), and University C (a mid-sized, industry-focused university). Within each case, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select six participants, ensuring a 360-degree perspective: two internal representatives (an Academic Director and a Faculty Member) to represent the Chinese perspective, and four external representatives (from partner institutions in the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada). To ensure distinct viewpoints, the four partner representatives per case were drawn from different IJP programs operating within that respective partner university.

Because the research involved complex organizational structures across multiple international jurisdictions, access was secured through established qualitative fieldwork protocols. The researcher first engaged with institutional "gatekeepers" (e.g., Academic Directors, Deans, and department heads) at the host Chinese universities. By providing a transparent overview of the study, ensuring minimal disruption, and guaranteeing strict confidentiality, operational permission was obtained to approach faculty, contact international partners, and securely access internal QA documents (such as institutional quality manuals and domestic compliance reports). Crucially, to mitigate any potential hierarchical pressure, it was established that individual participation decisions would not be communicated to superiors.

Following this negotiated access, individual participant recruitment commenced. Partner-institution informants (as well as domestic faculty) were directly recruited via formal email invitations emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation. If a representative expressed interest, a follow-up call or email detailed the research objectives, time commitment, and preliminary questions prior to formal consent. During this individual recruitment phase, access to the partner institutions' internal QA documents (such as cross-border moderation reports) was concurrently negotiated directly with these partner representatives under the same rigorous assurances of data confidentiality applied to the host universities. To protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned an anonymous code identifying their university case, role, and national context. Table 1 provides the complete overview of the participant sample, including their approximate years of IJP experience to denote their level of expertise.

TABLE 1. Anonymized List of Research Participants.

Label	Role	Institution / Context	Country	Years of IJP Experience
Case A		**(Large, comprehensive, long-standing IJPs)**		
CU-A1	Academic Director	Chinese University A	China	14 years
CU-A2	Faculty Member	Chinese University A	China	8 years
UK-A	Partner Representative	UK Partner University for A	UK	15 years
US-A	Partner Representative	US Partner University for A	US	18 years
AU-A	Partner Representative	Australian Partner University for A	Australia	12 years
CA-A	Partner Representative	Canadian Partner University for A	Canada	20 years
Case B		**(Smaller, specialized, newer IJPs)**		
CU-B1	Academic Director	Chinese University B	China	11 years
CU-B2	Faculty Member	Chinese University B	China	6 years
UK-B	Partner Representative	UK Partner University for B	UK	10 years
US-B	Partner Representative	US Partner University for B	US	16 years
AU-B	Partner Representative	Australian Partner University for B	Australia	14 years
CA-B	Partner Representative	Canadian Partner University for B	Canada	11 years
Case C		**(Mid-sized, industry-focused, established IJPs)**		
CU-C1	Academic Director	Chinese University C	China	16 years
CU-C2	Faculty Member	Chinese University C	China	9 years
UK-C	Partner Representative	UK Partner University for C	UK	19 years
US-C	Partner Representative	US Partner University for C	US	12 years
AU-C	Partner Representative	Australian Partner University for C	Australia	15 years
CA-C	Partner Representative	Canadian Partner University for C	Canada	17 years

DATA COLLECTION METHOD/ INSTRUMENTATION

The primary instruments used for data collection were semi-structured interview guides and a document analysis protocol. Data collection took place between November 2024 and May 2025. Two distinct interview guides were developed: one for Chinese university representatives and one for partner university representatives. These guides were designed to elicit rich narratives regarding current QA practices, challenges in alignment, and recommendations for model components (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015; Maher & Bedwei-Majdoub 2025). A total of 18 interviews were conducted, with an average duration of approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. To accommodate the geographical distribution and scheduling needs of the participants, interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing platforms or, where feasible and preferred by the participant, in person. To ensure maximum clarity and participant comfort, interviews with partner representatives were conducted in English, whereas interviews with Chinese university representatives were conducted in Chinese. Complementing the interviews, a document analysis protocol was used to systematically review institutional policies, partnership agreements, and accreditation reports (Bowen 2009; Kutsyuruba 2023).

To ensure the validity and reliability (trustworthiness) of these instruments, a rigorous validation process was undertaken. The interview guides were first reviewed by two subject matter experts, an Associate Professor in Higher Education and an Academic Director of cross-border programs, to ensure content validity and cultural sensitivity. Following this, a pilot test was conducted to refine the clarity of the questions. The reliability of the data collection was further strengthened through data source triangulation, where findings from the interviews were cross-verified against the official institutional documents, and through member checking, where key participants reviewed summary findings to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Tariq 2025).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given that formal institutional ethical review committees had not yet been established at the participating Chinese universities at the time of the study, a formal ethical approval reference number was not issued. However, all research activities were conducted in strict compliance with internationally recognized ethical standards for qualitative educational research (Creswell & Poth 2024). Building upon the confidentiality protocols established during site access negotiations, the cornerstone of the

ethical procedure was securing voluntary, informed consent at the individual level. Potential participants were provided with formal documentation outlining the study's objectives, potential risks, rigorous data anonymization procedures (including the use of alphanumeric labels), and their absolute right to withdraw at any time without negative consequence. Formal, written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to any data collection, and their voluntary agreement to be audio-recorded was verbally re-confirmed at the immediate outset of each interview session.

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

The data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative analysis software (Jackson & Bazeley 2019) to facilitate a systematic and rigorous coding process. The analysis followed the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke 2021). The analysis was tailored to answer each of the consolidated research questions. For RQ1 (The Context), data were coded for instances of systemic conflict, such as "centralization vs. decentralization" or "input vs. outcome," to identify the root causes of friction in the curriculum development process. For RQ2 (The Solution), an inductive approach was used to code stakeholder recommendations. These codes were then grouped into semantic themes (e.g., "Need for Industry Links," "Need for Faculty Training") and mapped to the seven theoretical domains of the conceptual framework to construct the final CTAFRIS model. Finally, for RQ3 (Implementation), data were coded for "risks of non-compliance" and "strategies for integration," identifying patterns related to leadership support and continuous improvement mechanisms. This structured analytical process ensured that the findings were directly traceable to the empirical data, moving from raw codes to overarching themes that informed the model design.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: THE SYSTEMIC FRICTION – NAVIGATING TWO WORLDS OF QUALITY

The first research question sought to understand how divergent quality assurance frameworks create friction in the IJP curriculum development process. The analysis reveals that Sino-foreign partnerships do not operate within a single, shared understanding of quality. Instead, they must navigate two fundamentally distinct "worlds" of quality assurance: a Western model driven by outcomes and decentralization, and a Chinese model driven by inputs and centralization.

a. The Clash of Philosophies: Inputs versus Outcomes

The findings establish a clear dichotomy in how quality is defined. Triangulating interview data with official QA documents, the analysis confirms that international partners universally prioritize alignment with their home-country national frameworks, framing quality almost exclusively in terms of demonstrable student learning outcomes. The US partner for University C (US-C) articulated this philosophy clearly:

> "We believe assessment should be a meaningful measure of student learning. The assessment methods should be closely aligned with the learning outcomes stated for the program."
>
> (US-C)

Rather than merely being a procedural preference, this perspective reflects the dominance of neo-liberal ideologies in Western higher education, which demand that institutions prove their value to the market through measurable results (Marginson 2018). This outcome-driven approach aligns with the global trend toward OBE noted in the literature (Biggs & Tang 2011; González Ferreras & Wagenaar 2023). However, applying OBE in this context is complex because it clashes with the operational reality of the Chinese system.

In stark contrast, document analysis of internal Chinese QA manuals confirmed that Chinese universities operate within a highly centralized system where quality is primarily defined by compliance with MoE standards. These standards heavily emphasize inputs, such as faculty credentials and resource allocation. The Academic Director at University A (CU-A1) described this priority:

> "Our internal review process focuses heavily on ensuring compliance with national standards, which often involve evaluating inputs such as faculty qualifications, resources, and the adherence to set procedures."
>
> (CU-A1)

These priorities suggest that Chinese administrators are structurally incentivized to prioritize resource metrics over learning outcomes. While it is tempting to attribute this solely to a cultural context of high power distance and a Confucian heritage that emphasizes state-led development (Hofstede 2001; Li 2019), these dimensions are better understood as contextual factors that shape, rather than definitively cause, this centralized approach. Operationally, the "input-driven" nature of the Chinese system (Wang 2023) creates a fundamental misalignment with the "outcome-driven" expectations of partners (Orelus 2023). This supports Ma & Tao (2022) and Zhang et al. (2022)

regarding the tension between state control and autonomy. Consequently, IJP administrators are forced to navigate contradictory regulatory demands, creating inevitable friction in collaborative design.

b. The Consequence: A Reactive and Uneven Process

This philosophical divergence directly impacts the curriculum development process, resulting in a workflow that is often reactive rather than collaborative. The cross-case analysis revealed a consistent pattern: universities utilize multi-stage internal review processes designed to ensure domestic compliance before a program is presented to international partners. A faculty member at University A (CU-A2) described the lived reality of this "front-loaded" process:

> "In some of our earlier IJP collaborations, the partner university had a much stronger voice in the decision-making process... It was hard to fully integrate our experiences and perspectives... into the curriculum design."
>
> (CU-A2)

This structure often marginalizes the partner's role in the early design phases. Driven by an institutional need to mitigate risk by securing internal political approval before external engagement, the current process encourages a "compliance-first" mindset. Here, the international partner is treated as a final gatekeeper rather than a co-creator. This finding contradicts the ideal "Collaborative Curriculum Design Model" advocated by Healey et al. (2013), which presumes equal, early-stage participation. Instead, it supports the observations of Reiffenrath and Thielsch (2022), who found that Chinese IJP development is often characterized by a lack of genuine co-creation.

The critical theoretical implication is that institutions fail to create a "curricular third space" (Whitchurch 2008; Kligyte et al. 2019). By treating quality assurance as a sequential process, namely domestic approval first, international validation second, the opportunity for hybrid pedagogy is lost. This ad-hoc nature of collaboration, also observed at the less-resourced University B, confirms that the current system often produces friction, misalignment, and missed opportunities for genuine collaboration (Kepe 2022).

RQ2: THE CTAFRIS MODEL – BRIDGING THE GAP

The second research question sought to identify the essential components of a quality assessment model capable of bridging the divergent standards identified in RQ1. The analysis reveals a powerful consensus across the dataset. Participants from all three universities and their respective partners consistently converged on seven core domains. However, a critical analysis of these recommendations reveals that stakeholders are not merely asking for a checklist; they are demanding a fundamental shift in how educational value is constructed in the Sino-foreign context.

a. The Academic Core: From Content Delivery to Constructive Alignment

Stakeholders universally prioritized the academic core, but the data indicates a critical shift in the definition of academic quality. While this was a dominant theme across all interviews, the UK partner for University B (UK-B) articulated the need for a structural shift most clearly:

> "It's vital that the learning outcomes are clearly defined and that the courses build on each other logically, aligning with the UK's Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications. This ensures the IJP meets the standards expected of UK higher education qualifications."
>
> (UK-B)

This suggests that a quality curriculum must be explicitly mapped to partner national frameworks rather than relying solely on internal institutional goals. This necessity arises from the clash between the Chinese system, which often structures curricula around standardized disciplinary content to meet MoE input requirements (Wang 2023), and Western systems that prioritize structural logic. Therefore, curricular alignment forces the Chinese university to justify its curriculum logic to the partner's national framework. Theoretically, this supports the principle of Constructive Alignment (Biggs & Tang 2011; Ali 2019), but it extends the work of Frost and Ackrill (2025) by demonstrating that in cross-border contexts, alignment serves as a translation tool between divergent systemic logics. The cross-case consistency of this finding confirms that without this structural translation, the curriculum remains fragmented.

Similarly, for Teaching and Learning, the data revealed a profound pedagogical clash. Partners consistently pushed for student-centered methods, while Chinese faculty viewed the IJP as a lever to disrupt traditional, teacher-centered norms. The UK partner for University C (UK-C) stated:

> "We want to see evidence that students are actively engaged in the learning process... providing more opportunities for teamwork and peer learning, getting away from relying solely on the traditional lecture format."
>
> (UK-C)

Participants often interpreted this pedagogical resistance through the lens of contextual differences between Western Socratic traditions and Confucian heritage culture, which traditionally emphasizes teacher authority (Hofstede 2001; Li 2019). However, a critical nuance emerged regarding language. While partner representatives frequently promoted active learning, adopting these methods is complex. As Buckley (2021) notes in critiquing transnational 'teaching and learning' discourses, pedagogical approaches are not universally transferable without considering the linguistic and cognitive load placed on faculty operating in a second language. This indicates that language support must be treated as a pedagogical prerequisite, not just a student service.

Regarding Assessment and Evaluation, stakeholders identified a significant gap in transparency and moderation. The Australian partner (AU-B) emphasized:

> "Rigorous assessment is essential. We expect a range of assessment methods... and clear grading criteria. We've shared our assessment policies... to help them develop more robust assessment practices."
>
> (AU-B)

This highlights a potential lack of trust in cross-border grading parity. To prevent inconsistent standards when two different educational cultures evaluate the same work, explicit assessment oversight protocols, such as moderation, must be built into the model. This supports Suskie's (2018) argument for assessment validity and aligns with Sun et al. (2024) regarding the need for "authentic assessment," demonstrating that assessment standards are culturally contingent and require explicit negotiation.

b. The Enablers: Addressing Asymmetry through Resource Dependence

The findings regarding Faculty Expertise and Resources move the discussion from pedagogy to power. Stakeholders argued that academic quality is contingent on structural equity. While Chinese internal documents often focus on PhD ratios, interview data highlighted a different priority. The US partner (US-B) stated:

> "We look for appropriate academic credentials, demonstrable teaching experience, and an active research agenda, which keeps faculty current in their field..."
>
> (US-B)

This underscores that static credentials are often insufficient for the dynamic demands of an intercultural classroom. This implies that the model must redefine "Expertise" to include Intercultural Competence and Professional Development. This supports Deardorff's (2006) theory on intercultural competence but challenges the traditional Chinese regulatory focus on input-based credentialing (Wang 2023).

The finding regarding Resources exposes the material reality of these partnerships. Document analysis of internal reports at University B confirmed significant deficits in laboratory equipment, lending significant weight to the interview data. A faculty member (CU-B2) highlighted the inequity:

> "Our labs are outdated, and we don't have access to the same equipment and software that students at our UK Partner Institution use. This makes it difficult to keep up with the latest advancements... and creates a sense of inequity."
>
> (CU-B2)

Viewed through Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978; Kohtamäki 2024), the Chinese university's dependence on external validation is exacerbated by a lack of material resources, creating a center-periphery dynamic. These resource asymmetries threaten the integrity of the partnership, suggesting that academic quality cannot exist without structural equity. This supports the findings of Khalid and Farid (2025) regarding sustainability, justifying the inclusion of "Resources and Infrastructure" as a core component.

c. The Differentiators: Institutionalizing Internationalization

Finally, there was unanimous agreement that IJPs must deliver unique value through Internationalization and Student Support. The US partner (US-C) argued for curriculum integration:

> "We strongly believe that IJPs should prepare students for global citizenship... We want to see international perspectives integrated throughout the curriculum."
>
> (US-C)

This reveals a desire to distinguish IJPs from standard domestic programs, suggesting "Internationalization" must be treated as a curricular outcome to be assessed, supporting Knight's (2004) conceptualization of "Internationalization at Home." However, the cross-case analysis revealed a gap: while this is a goal, it is rarely assessed. The model's inclusion of "Assessment of Intercultural Outcomes" addresses this theoretical gap by demanding evidence for what is usually just an aspirational claim (Qi 2024).

Furthermore, the demand for Student Voice represents a radical shift in the Chinese context. While document analysis showed the existence of basic services, interview participants argued these were insufficient. A faculty member (CU-B2) noted:

> "We have student evaluations, of course, but they are usually done at the end of the program."
>
> (CU-B2)

Because current feedback loops are largely passive and reactive, the model must include a governance intervention to democratize the feedback loop. This expands upon Student Development Theory (Chickering & Reisser 1993; Duran et al. 2024) by asserting that student engagement is a mechanism for quality assurance itself. By formalizing "Student Voice," the model disrupts the traditional hierarchy to ensure quality is defined by the end-user experience.

d. Synthesis of the Model

The construction of the CTAFRIS Model involved a systematic synthesis of these findings. While the seven components were derived from the thematic consensus of the interview data discussed above, the specific criteria and indicators were further triangulated with the document analysis. By reviewing the accreditation standards of partners (e.g., QAA, TEQSA) and the internal quality manuals of the case study universities, specific "best practice" artifacts, such as mapping documents, moderation reports, and feedback loops, were identified. These were integrated into the model to ensure that the high-level stakeholder demands could be translated into auditable, practical evidence.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of this synthesized model, illustrating how these interconnected domains form a holistic ecosystem of quality.



FIGURE 2. The CTAFRIS Model for Quality Assessment of IJP Curricula.

To operationalize this ecosystem, the model includes specific criteria and indicators for each component. Table 2 details the complete framework, providing the practical benchmarks institutions can use to align their programs with international standards.

TABLE 2. The Complete CTAFRIS Model Framework for IJP Quality Assessment.

Component	Criteria	Indicators / Examples of Evidence
C: Curriculum Design & Alignment	1. Alignment with Partner Country Qualifications Frameworks	i. Formal mapping document showing alignment of IJP learning outcomes to partner country's framework (e.g., FHEQ, AQF). ii. Evidence of joint review and approval of learning outcomes by both partners.
	2. Coherence and Logical Progression	i. Clear program structure diagram with course prerequisites and pathways. ii. Syllabi show logical sequencing of content from foundational to advanced levels.
	3. Industry Relevance & Employability	i. Minutes from industry advisory board meetings. ii. Curriculum includes work-integrated learning, internships, or capstone projects linked to industry problems.
	4. Research Collaboration Opportunities	i. Inclusion of joint research projects or a supervised research thesis option in the curriculum. ii. Evidence of co-authored publications or conference presentations by faculty and students.
T: Teaching & Learning	5. Use of Active & Student-Centered Learning Strategies	i. Observation of classroom activities (e.g., problem-based learning, case studies, group work). ii. Syllabi and lesson plans detail student-led activities and discussions.
	6. Use of Innovative & Technology-Enhanced Pedagogy	i. Evidence of blended learning, flipped classroom models, or virtual labs. ii. Use of online collaborative platforms (e.g., Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects), simulations, or specialized software.
	7. Alignment with Partner Country Pedagogical Practices	i. Evidence of joint faculty workshops on teaching methods. ii. Student feedback comparing teaching styles; evidence of pedagogical adaptation.
	8. Language Proficiency and Support	i. Clear, published language proficiency requirements for both faculty and students. ii. Availability and usage data of language support centers or embedded language courses.
A: Assessment & Evaluation	9. Alignment of Assessment with Learning Outcomes	i. Assessment matrix mapping each assessment task to specific program learning outcomes. ii. Samples of student work that clearly demonstrate achievement of stated outcomes.
	10. Diversity of Assessment Methods	i. Portfolio of assessment methods used across the program (e.g., exams, essays, projects, presentations, portfolios, lab reports).
	11. Use of Authentic Assessment	i. Examples of assessments that simulate real-world professional tasks, problems, or scenarios.
	12. Provision of Timely and Constructive Feedback	i. Clear and published policy on feedback turnaround times. ii. Examples of detailed feedback rubrics or annotated student work used for formative development.
	13. Moderation of Assessment	i Documentation of internal and external moderation processes. ii. Minutes from joint assessment review meetings between partners.
F: Faculty Expertise & Qualifications	14. Academic Credentials	i. Roster of faculty qualifications, including terminal degrees (e.g., % with PhD).
	15. Relevant Teaching Experience	i. Faculty CVs showing experience in international, cross-cultural, or bilingual teaching contexts.

continue ...

... cont.

	16. Research Expertise & Scholarly Activity	i. Evidence of recent publications, conference presentations, or grants in the relevant field.
	17. Industry Connections	i. Faculty CVs showing relevant professional experience, consulting work, or active industry partnerships.
	18. Intercultural Competence	i. Evidence of faculty participation in intercultural training or significant international experience.
	19. Commitment to Ongoing Professional Development	i. Records of faculty participation in workshops on pedagogy, assessment, or IJP management.
R: Resources & Infrastructure	20. Library & Information Resources	i. Evidence of access to relevant online databases, journals, and digital collections (from both partners).
	21. Technology Infrastructure	i. Audit of campus Wi-Fi, computer labs, and availability of required online learning platforms.
	22. Learning Spaces	i. Audit of the quality, accessibility, and suitability of classrooms, labs, and collaborative study areas.
	23. Industry-Standard Equipment and Facilities	i. For professional programs, an audit of specialized labs, equipment, or software, ensuring currency.
	24. Accessibility for Students with Disabilities	i. Availability of a disability support services office. ii. Evidence of accessible learning materials and physical spaces.
	25. Sustainability (Environmental, Financial, Social)	i. A clear, multi-year budget and financial plan for the IJP. ii. Evidence of long-term institutional commitment in strategic planning documents.
I: Internationalization & Cross-Cultural Competencies	26. Internationalization of the Curriculum	i. Syllabi show inclusion of international case studies, diverse scholarly literature, and global perspectives.
	27. Development of Cross-Cultural Competencies	i. Availability of and participation rates in study abroad, virtual exchange, or COIL projects.
	28. Assessment of Intercultural Learning Outcomes	i. Use of formal assessment tools (e.g., IDI) or portfolio-based assessment of intercultural skills. ii. Inclusion of intercultural competence as a formal program learning outcome.
S: Student Engagement & Support Services	29. Student Satisfaction	i. Systematic collection and analysis of student feedback data (e.g., course evaluations, annual surveys, exit surveys).
	30. Academic Support Services	i. Directory and usage data for tutoring, writing centers, and dedicated academic advising for IJP students.
	31. Student Integration and Engagement	i. Evidence of orientation programs, peer mentoring schemes, and social/cultural activities designed for IJP students.
	32. Student Voice and Representation	i. Minutes from program committees showing student representative attendance and meaningful input. ii. "You said, we did" reports showing how student feedback is used for program improvements.

By explicitly defining criteria across these seven domains, the CTAFRIS Model serves as the synthesized solution to the research problem, providing the "bridging mechanism" needed to harmonize the divergent expectations identified in RQ1.

RQ3: FROM COMPLIANCE TO SUSTAINABILITY – IMPLEMENTING THE MODEL

The third research question addressed how the CTAFRIS model can be sustainably integrated into institutional practice. The analysis reveals that stakeholders perceived two powerful forces as necessary for successful implementation: the urgent need to mitigate the high stakes of non-compliance, and the strategic necessity of shifting from a culture of "validation" to one of "co-creation".

a. The High Stakes of Quality Failure

Stakeholders universally agreed that failure to meet international quality standards carries severe, multi-level consequences. The most immediate risk is to the student. A faculty member at University B (CU-B2) articulated this fundamental concern:

> "If quality standards aren't met, it raises serious concerns. It impacts students, whose degrees may not be recognized, affecting their career prospects."
>
> (CU-B2)

This framing suggests that quality assurance is not merely an administrative exercise but an ethical obligation bound by the "Psychological Contract" (Rousseau 1989; Kahar et al. 2024) in transnational education. Participants perceived that a breach of quality standards is a fundamental violation of this contract. This finding supports the theory of "reputational risk" in higher education (Hazelkorn 2015; Al Hassani & Wilkins 2022). Furthermore, stakeholders like CA-C warned of a "cascade effect" on national soft power (Miao 2021), suggesting that the CTAFRIS model is perceived as a necessary tool for safeguarding the legitimacy of the entire sector.

b. Fostering a Culture of Collaboration and Communication

To mitigate these risks, participants from both Chinese and partner institutions converged on the recommendation that the model must be implemented through robust collaboration. The findings indicate that stakeholders believe sustainable integration requires moving beyond transactional interactions to deep, relational partnerships. The Academic Director at University C (CU-C1) emphasized the importance of face-to-face engagement:

> "Building strong IJPs requires building strong relationships and trust. And that's hard to do when you don't invest the time in engaging face-to-face."
>
> (CU-C1)

Participants suggested that building this trust reflects the high-context nature of regional professional interactions (Li 2019), emphasizing that the model cannot function solely as a checklist but must serve as a shared language to facilitate dialogue. This supports inter-organizational collaboration theory (Oliver 1990; Hedenmo 2024), which posits that trust is the essential currency of partnership, requiring a shift in the power dynamic from external validation to mutual problem-solving.

c. Building Capacity and Continuous Improvement

Finally, triangulation of interview data with strategic planning documents reveals that participants identified building institutional capacity as a prerequisite for integration. Stakeholders identified a critical need for leadership support and professional development to empower faculty to use the model. The US partner for University B (US-B) identified this as the ultimate prerequisite:

> "Most of all, they need strong leadership support to signal that quality matters."
>
> (US-B)

Given the hierarchical nature of university governance, stakeholders perceived that grass-roots faculty efforts require top-down endorsement to enact change. This implies that integration strategies must align with Kotter's (1996) organizational change model, specifically the need to "create a guiding coalition".

Furthermore, participants insisted that the integration must be cyclical. Contrasting the mature processes at University A with the ad-hoc approaches at University B, the Academic Director at University A (CU-A1) described their process:

> "We conduct program evaluations every three years... This cyclical process involves both internal and external reviewers, and assesses the IJP's alignment with... strategic goals."
>
> (CU-A1)

This suggests that the model must be anchored in a formal cycle of review to be sustainable. This supports the arguments of Javed and Alenezi (2023) regarding Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). In the IJP context, participants perceive CQI as the necessary mechanism that prevents the "Two Worlds" of quality from drifting further apart.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to bridge the systemic divergence between the centralized QA frameworks of Chinese universities and the outcome-oriented standards of their international partners by developing and proposing a contextually relevant quality assessment model. The findings revealed a profound "two worlds" friction, where domestic compliance pressures often lead to a reactive curriculum development process that marginalizes early partner involvement. In response, this research synthesized stakeholder insights to propose the CTAFRIS Model, a seven-component framework designed to harmonize these conflicting regulatory demands. It is concluded that while systemic differences are deep-seated, a structured bridging mechanism like the CTAFRIS model can transform quality assurance from a source of operational friction into a

foundation for genuine co-creation.

Theoretically, this research contributes by applying the concept of a "curricular third space" to quality assurance, demonstrating that academic alignment requires translating distinct systemic logics rather than merely importing external standards. Practically, the proposed CTAFRIS model provides institutions with an empirically grounded framework to proactively manage quality, mitigate non-compliance risks, and foster continuous improvement. However, this study is subject to certain limitations. First, its qualitative focus on three specific universities and reliance on institutional stakeholders excludes direct student and employer perspectives. Second, the findings regarding the model's integration (RQ3) are based on the stakeholders' perceptions of necessary conditions rather than on an observed, longitudinal implementation of the model itself. Future research should therefore encompass a comprehensive validation phase, including large-scale quantitative field testing of the model across diverse institutional types, to measure its practical impact on student outcomes over time.

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