Article

Engaging with International Organisations in Chinese Vocational Education: Insights from an Institutional Case Study

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Abstract: This study examines cooperation between a Chinese vocational education institution and UNESCO through a qualitative institutional case study. Drawing on documentary materials and supplementary researcher notes and reflective records, the study analyses how the cooperation developed, the forms and institutional roles it assumed, and the mechanisms and practical demands associated with its continuity. The findings show that cooperation developed through participation in international networks and programmes, project implementation and capacity development, knowledge translation and co-production, and international convening and partnership building. Continuity was supported by formal institutional platforms, a stable coordinating function, the mobilisation of distributed expertise, accumulated external relationships and broader institutional support. The case also highlights the importance of maintaining active partnership networks and adapting locally grounded knowledge for use across contexts. The study contributes an institutional perspective to research on vocational education internationalisation and cooperation with international organisations.

Keywords: vocational education; internationalisation; international organisations; international cooperation; case study

1. Introduction

Internationalisation has become an increasingly important dimension of vocational education. At the institutional level, it can involve transnational provision, professional development, the cross-border exchange and adaptation of vocational practices, and participation in international projects, networks and partnerships [1]. Engagement with international organisations represents a distinctive form of institutional internationalisation, linking vocational education institutions with multilateral programmes, international networks and wider processes of knowledge exchange [2,3].

Research on international organisations in education has focused largely on their roles in policy, governance and knowledge production. In vocational education, they have been examined particularly as knowledge producers, agenda setters and actors in policy transfer [2]. This work provides substantial insight into how international organisations influence educational ideas and policy processes. A complementary institutional perspective considers how education institutions participate in the programmes, networks and relationships associated with international organisations. Research on international university partnerships highlights the importance of organisational arrangements, interpersonal relationships and accumulated experience in sustaining cooperation [4]. Programmes such as the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme illustrate how universities can engage in research, knowledge exchange and capacity development within international networks [5]. However, less attention has been paid to how these forms of institutional engagement develop over time and become embedded in continuing cooperation.

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This gap is particularly relevant to Chinese vocational education. Studies of China's engagement with international organisations have concentrated mainly on national policymaking and participation in global education governance [6,7]. Research on vocational education internationalisation, meanwhile, has documented a growing range of international activities among Chinese institutions, including overseas provision and institutional partnerships [8-10]. Engagement with international organisations lies at the intersection of these two bodies of research, but has rarely been examined as an institutional relationship that develops across successive forms of cooperation. Within Chinese vocational education, the institutional processes underlying such engagement have received comparatively limited attention.

Against this background, this study examines the cooperation between a Chinese higher vocational education institution and UNESCO through a case study of Shenzhen Polytechnic University. The analysis traces the development and thematic focus of the cooperation, examines its main forms and institutional roles, and identifies the conditions and practical demands associated with maintaining the relationship over time. By approaching international cooperation as an evolving institutional relationship, the study adds an institutional perspective to research on Chinese vocational education internationalisation and on educational engagement with international organisations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Internationalisation in Vocational Education

Internationalisation has become an increasingly visible dimension of vocational education, although it has developed as a distinct area of scholarship more slowly than internationalisation in higher education. Early work conceptualised internationalisation of vocational education as an emerging and interdisciplinary field spanning sectoral, institutional, and individual levels [1]. Its scope extends beyond international student mobility to include transnational provision, teacher professional development, the cross-border transfer and adaptation of vocational educational practices, and other forms of international institutional activity [1]. A substantial strand of subsequent scholarship has examined internationalisation through the international transfer of vocational education systems, policies, and practices [11,12]. This research is particularly prominent in studies of attempts to introduce elements of established vocational education models, notably dual training systems, into different economic, institutional, and cultural settings. Reviews of this literature show that vocational education transfer has been investigated from several disciplinary perspectives, including vocational education, comparative education, comparative political economy, and international human resource management [11,12]. These perspectives variously emphasise system-level policy transfer, organisational strategies, implementation processes, and the conditions affecting individual cooperation projects.

Research on international vocational education and training (VET) cooperation broadens this perspective by highlighting the diversity of actors and objectives involved in cross-border activities. International cooperation may simultaneously pursue educational, economic, and development objectives, and the organisations involved do not necessarily operate with identical priorities [13]. Research on German international VET cooperation, for example, has identified tensions between different policy rationales and between rhetorical coordination and operational practice [13]. Evidence from Ukraine similarly shows that cooperation with international organisations can contribute to changes in VET governance, public–private partnerships, quality assurance, qualifications, and digitalisation [14]. Research on dual VET transfer has further emphasised the importance of adapting externally promoted models to local social and institutional contexts and of assessing such cooperation against broader human-development objectives [15]. These studies portray international VET cooperation as a multi-actor and context-dependent process rather than a unidirectional transfer of external expertise.

Alongside these system- and project-level perspectives, recent research has begun to pay greater attention to VET providers and their organisational capacity for international activity. Studies of German VET providers indicate that sustained internationalisation depends on resources and competences such as external relationships, intercultural competence, organisational resources, and the capacity to adapt educational products to different contexts [16]. Recent research has also extended analysis across micro, meso, and macro levels, bringing provider strategies, international networks, institutionalised cooperation, and local ownership more explicitly into the field [17]. This body of work directs attention towards the international organisations through which internationalisation is implemented.

2.2. International Organisations in Education and VET

International organisations have long played an important role in the development and circulation of educational ideas, policies, and practices across national boundaries. Research on global education governance has shown that their influence is not limited to formal regulatory authority or financial assistance. International organisations have contributed to constructing and disseminating influential policy ideas and problem definitions in education [18], while the production and circulation of policy-relevant knowledge have become important sources of organisational authority [19,20]. Studies of the World Bank, OECD, and UNESCO in particular demonstrate how international organisations operate not only as policy actors but also as producers, managers, and transmitters of educational knowledge [20].

Their role in VET has received less systematic scholarly attention. Klassen's review [2] on vocational education and international organisations (ILO, OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank) identifies three prominent roles attributed to international organisations in the VET literature: knowledge producers, producers of VET agendas, and actors in policy transfer. The review also identifies substantial gaps within these areas. International-organisation data and knowledge products are frequently used in VET research without equivalent attention to how such knowledge is produced, while research on organisational agendas has concentrated disproportionately on selected organisations and policy positions [2]. Consequently, the mechanisms through which different international organisations influence and participate in VET remain unevenly understood.

International organisations also work through programmes, networks, partnerships, and institutional relationships that connect global agendas with national and organisational settings. International cooperation in Ukrainian VET, for example, has operated through projects and initiatives linking international organisations with government agencies and other national actors [14]. In higher education, the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme provides another form of institutional connection, linking universities with UNESCO through research, knowledge exchange, capacity development, and wider societal objectives [5]. Such arrangements draw attention to an aspect of international organisations that is less visible in research focused primarily on policy diffusion or national governance: educational institutions may themselves become members, partners, implementers, knowledge contributors, or conveners within international programmes and networks.

This distinction is particularly relevant in VET, where implementation is institutionally dispersed and cooperation often involves ministries, vocational institutions, employers, professional bodies, and international partners. Existing scholarship provides substantial insight into the knowledge, agendas, and policy influence of international organisations, but gives a less developed account of cooperation from the perspective of individual education providers. An institutional perspective raises additional questions about how institutions enter and sustain international networks, what forms of activity emerge from these relationships, what roles they assume within international programmes, and what organisational resources and arrangements support continued participation. Examining these processes complements the predominantly governance-

and policy-oriented literature by bringing the organisational side of international cooperation into view.

2.3. Cooperation between Chinese Educational Institutions and International Organisations

Research on China's educational relationships with international organisations has concentrated primarily on national policy and global governance. Earlier work examined how organisations such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation became involved in changing patterns of Chinese higher education governance and policymaking [7]. More recent scholarship has focused on China's expanding participation in multilateral education governance, particularly through UNESCO [6,21]. This research shows that China's engagement with international organisations intersects with domestic education priorities, changing approaches to multilateralism, and wider questions of international positioning and global governance [6,21].

A smaller body of research has moved towards the institutional level, particularly in studies of Chinese universities and the United Nations system. Chinese higher education institutions have established a range of arrangements to support participation in the UN system, including degree programmes, formal university–UN collaborative projects, institutional funding schemes, and UN-related events [22]. This work is useful because it demonstrates that relations with international organisations are mediated through concrete organisational structures and activities within universities. It also shows that establishing a formal programme does not necessarily ensure sustained institutional support. Some participants in UN internship schemes, for example, reported limited follow-up guidance once they had entered the organisations [22].

Recent research has drawn further attention to the institutional capacities underpinning links between Chinese higher education and international organisations. A comparative study of China, the United States, Switzerland, and the Netherlands highlights the contribution that higher education systems can make to the broader ecosystems in which international organisations operate [23]. In the Chinese context, the study identifies limitations in specialised programmes, access to practitioners with international-organisation experience, career-support arrangements, and established connections between universities and international organisations [23]. This perspective is useful because it shifts attention from national aspirations towards the institutional expertise, organisational arrangements, and relational resources through which such aspirations may be supported.

Within Chinese vocational education, scholarship has increasingly documented the expansion and diversification of international activity, but direct institutional cooperation with international organisations has received considerably less attention [3]. Recent research has examined overseas provision, the international dissemination of vocational curricula and standards, teacher mobility, digital platforms, and cooperation among governments, vocational institutions, industries, and enterprises [8]. Evidence from 1,150 vocational colleges across 30 provincial-level regions points both to the expansion of overseas educational activity and to continuing challenges involving institutional capacity, policy support, programme development, and staff capabilities [8]. An analysis of 47 cases of higher vocational internationalisation likewise identifies institutional and organisational conditions, digital platforms, vocational standards, diversified participating actors, and cross-cultural exchange as components of different internationalisation pathways [9]. The published study explicitly identifies organisational constraints among the configurations that may impede high-quality internationalisation. These studies provide increasingly detailed evidence about how Chinese vocational institutions internationalise, but their central concern remains the broader internationalisation or "going global" agenda rather than cooperation between vocational institutions and international organisations as a distinct institutional relationship.

Overall, studies of China and international organisations provide substantial insight into national policy, multilateralism, and global education governance, while a smaller body of scholarship has begun to examine university-level arrangements associated with

the United Nations and other international organisations. Research on Chinese vocational education documents increasingly diverse international activities and the organisational conditions associated with them, but rarely focuses on cooperation with international organisations as an object of institutional analysis. Less is known about how a vocational institution develops and sustains such cooperation across different forms of activity, how its roles within international programmes and networks develop over time, and what internal conditions and constraints shape the continuity of this engagement. An institutional case study can address this gap by connecting macro-level research on international organisations with the meso-level organisational processes through which international cooperation is enacted in vocational education.

3. Context and Methods

3.1. Case Selection

This study adopted a qualitative institutional case study design [24]. A case study approach was appropriate because institutional cooperation between vocational education institutions and international organisations remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in the Chinese context, and because the study seeks to understand how such cooperation develops within a specific institutional setting over time. This design enables close examination of the processes, roles and organisational arrangements through which an institutional relationship evolves.

A higher vocational education institution in southern China was selected purposively as an information-rich case. Shenzhen Polytechnic University (SZPU), formerly Shenzhen Polytechnic (SZPT), has participated in UNESCO-related programmes and networks since 2006. The duration and diversity of this cooperation provided sufficient variation to examine continuity and change within a single institutional relationship. The empirical case was bounded to the institution's cooperation with UNESCO through relevant programmes, entities and networks, including UNESCO-UNEVOC and the UNEVOC Network, the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme, and relevant UNESCO offices and programmes. As a single institutional case, the study aims for analytical transferability rather than generalisation. The case is used to develop insights into the organisational processes, conditions and constraints involved in cooperation between vocational education institutions and international organisations.

3.2. Data Sources

The study draws primarily on documentary sources, supplemented by researcher notes and reflective records. Documentary sources included institutional webpages, news releases, event materials, publications and knowledge products from the case institution, together with relevant materials issued by UNESCO, UNESCO-UNEVOC and the UNEVOC Network. These materials were used to reconstruct major activities, institutional arrangements, formal roles and outputs associated with the cooperation. Researcher notes and reflective records provided supplementary process-level evidence. These records captured observations on programme development, coordination, implementation and organisational context. They were used to clarify and interpret processes that were not always fully visible in documentary sources. Any personally identifiable information was excluded or anonymised in analysis and reporting.

Materials were organised chronologically across the period from 2006 to 2026. Documentary coverage is less complete for the earlier years and becomes more extensive in the later period, particularly after the establishment of the UNESCO Chair in 2022. This unevenness in source coverage was taken into account when reconstructing the development of the cooperation and comparing patterns across periods.

3.3. Data Analysis and Researcher Positionality

The analysis combined chronological reconstruction with thematic analysis. Documentary materials were first arranged chronologically to reconstruct major developments in the institution's cooperation with UNESCO and to identify changes in

the organisational basis and thematic focus of the relationship over time. The materials were then examined comparatively across activities and periods to identify recurring patterns in the forms of cooperation, institutional roles, organisational arrangements and practical demands associated with continued engagement. Initial analytical categories were refined by comparing how similar functions and organisational processes appeared across different initiatives and stages of cooperation. This iterative process resulted in the main analytical themes presented in the findings.

The researchers are affiliated with the case institution and have been involved in relevant international cooperation activities. This institutional position provided contextual understanding of the coordination and implementation processes examined in the study. Researcher-generated records were therefore used alongside documentary sources to support the interpretation of how cooperation was organised in practice.

Researcher positionality was considered throughout data analysis. The researchers remained aware that close involvement in these activities could influence interpretation. To reduce potential subjectivity, observations were checked against documentary evidence where possible, and interpretations were based on recurring patterns across different activities and periods. Factual descriptions of activities were distinguished from interpretations of organisational processes, and evidence that did not fully align with initial impressions was also considered. These measures helped maintain a critical perspective while drawing on the contextual knowledge associated with the researchers' institutional position.

4. Findings

4.1. Development and Thematic Focus of Cooperation

The analysis identified four broad periods in the development of the institution's UNESCO-related cooperation between 2006 and 2026. The boundaries between these periods are approximate, as established forms of cooperation continued alongside newer activities and organisational arrangements. Across the period, the institutional basis and functional scope of cooperation expanded, while its substantive focus also became progressively more clearly defined.

2006–2013: Network entry and organisational anchoring. UNESCO-related cooperation began in 2006, when the institution joined the UNEVOC Network. The UNEVOC Centre was initially embedded within the institution's international affairs structure, providing an organisational basis for UNESCO-related cooperation. During this period, Network membership established a continuing institutional connection with the wider international technical and vocational education and training (TVET) community. Cooperation had yet to develop a clearly defined thematic specialisation, and the main significance of this period lay in establishing an organisational basis for subsequent participation in UNESCO-related activities and exchanges.

2014–2016: Programme participation and engagement with sustainability-related TVET agendas. The mid-2010s saw more substantive participation in UNESCO-UNEVOC programmes and collaborative projects. SZPU participated in the 2014 UNESCO-UNEVOC Global Forum on Skills for Work and Life: Post-2015 and subsequently joined a regional research initiative on greening TVET and skills in 2015, contributing research on green skills development in higher TVET institutions in Guangdong. The UNEVOC Centre also supported an international workshop on water and sustainable development, while exchanges with other UNEVOC Centres created opportunities for collaborative research. Sustainability, green skills and the changing contribution of TVET to development featured prominently in this period. Cooperation also extended into research, professional exchange and project-based collaboration.

2017–2021: Institutional expansion and growing attention to innovation and institutional responsiveness. Cooperation expanded further from 2017 as additional organisational arrangements were established and SZPU became more active in UNESCO-related programmes and international convening. In 2017, the Research and

Training Centre for the UNESCO Asia–Africa TVET Project was established, extending the institutional basis for research, training and cooperation with vocational education institutions in Asia and Africa.

The substantive scope of cooperation also broadened during this period. In 2018, SZPU hosted an international TVET conference involving UNEVOC Centres, vocational institutions, enterprises and other organisations from multiple countries and regions. From 2019, participation in UNESCO-UNEVOC's Skills for Innovation Hubs initiative brought greater attention to institutional innovation and the capacity of TVET providers to respond to changing economic and technological conditions. SZPU undertook institutional self-assessment and subsequently contributed an innovative higher TVET practice to the UNESCO-UNEVOC knowledge platform. In 2021, the university participated in consultations related to UNESCO's new Strategy for TVET and contributed institutional practice to the Bridging Innovation and Learning in TVET (BILT) initiative. Across these activities, institutional innovation, emerging skills requirements and organisational development became increasingly visible areas of cooperation.

2022–2026: Digital transformation as a sustained thematic anchor. The establishment of the UNESCO Chair on Digitalization in Technical and Vocational Education and Training in 2022 further expanded the organisational basis for cooperation and gave the relationship a more clearly defined substantive focus. Operating alongside the UNEVOC Centre, the UNESCO Chair centred its work on digital transformation in TVET across research, capacity development, institutional assessment, knowledge production and international exchange. Early activities included participation in the UNESCO-UNEVOC BILT Self-Reflection Tool pilot, translation and dissemination of the UNESCO Strategy for TVET (2022–2029), capacity-development activities with international partners, and the development of programme syllabuses and open courses in digital technologies.

From 2023 onwards, digital transformation developed into a broader and more differentiated agenda. The Global Forum on Digital Transformation in TVET (Shenzhen) and the TVET Leadership Workshop on Digital Transformation became recurring platforms for international dialogue and capacity development. Their thematic scope included institutional strategy and governance, programme and curriculum transformation, digital learning environments, teacher capacity, educational technology and industry–education collaboration. Sustainability remained connected to this work, including through activities addressing the digital and green transitions. Regional cooperation also expanded through capacity-development initiatives in Asia and the establishment of the China–ASEAN TVET Digital Capacity-Building Centre with two partner UNEVOC Centres. Knowledge production increasingly focused on practical resources for institutional digital transformation, including research reports, open educational resources, digital courses and implementation-oriented guidance.

Artificial intelligence (AI) became increasingly prominent within this broader agenda from 2024. The Global Forum on Digital Transformation in TVET (Shenzhen) 2024, under the theme "Transforming TVET for the Age of AI", addressed AI-enabled transformation alongside governance, capacity development and partnerships. Subsequent cooperation extended to AI-related qualifications and competencies, AI-enabled teaching and learning, and institutional responses to emerging technologies. In 2026, SZPU worked with UNESCO-UNEVOC and Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg on Integrating AI in TVET: A Practical Guide for Institutions, supported by international expert consultation. AI thus became an increasingly visible component of an established digital-transformation agenda that continued to encompass governance, curriculum, pedagogy, institutional capacity and skills development.

Across the four periods, the institution's UNESCO-related cooperation developed in both organisational and thematic terms. UNEVOC Network membership remained a continuing institutional foundation, while additional platforms and activities expanded the scope of cooperation. At the same time, the substantive focus became more coherent, moving from a range of programme-related TVET concerns towards a recognisable field of institutional contribution centred on digital transformation. Within this field, the

agenda continued to develop in response to wider changes in TVET, including institutional innovation, sustainability, emerging technologies and artificial intelligence. The overall trajectory combined growing thematic continuity with increasing diversity in the forms of cooperation and institutional roles involved.

4.2. Forms of Cooperation and Institutional Roles

Across the case period, SZPU's UNESCO-related cooperation took several recurring forms, each associated with a different institutional role. Four forms were particularly prominent: participation in international networks and programmes, implementation and capacity development, knowledge translation and co-production, and international convening and partnership building. These forms frequently overlapped, creating a pattern of cooperation in which the university could perform several roles within the same initiative.

Participation in UNESCO networks and programmes provided a continuing channel through which SZPU engaged with international TVET agendas and professional communities. Through the UNEVOC Network and subsequent UNESCO-related initiatives, the university participated in policy dialogue, institutional learning, peer exchange, and collaborative programmes. This form of engagement positioned SZPU primarily as a network member and programme participant. Its significance lay in the continuity of interaction that it created. Repeated participation connected the institution with changing UNESCO priorities and with peer institutions working on similar TVET issues, while also creating opportunities for subsequent forms of cooperation.

A second form involved the implementation of projects and capacity-development activities. Here, SZPU assumed a more operational role through research, piloting, training, peer support, and institutional capacity development. Such activities required the university to translate broad programme objectives into concrete tasks, mobilise relevant expertise, and adapt activities to the settings of partner institutions. Capacity development also created sustained working relationships around specific institutional needs, including digital transformation, leadership development, teacher development, and organisational change. In this mode, cooperation became task-based and implementation-oriented, with SZPU acting as an institutional partner responsible for developing and delivering parts of a shared programme.

Knowledge-related cooperation formed a third and increasingly visible dimension. This involved several directions of knowledge movement. UNESCO strategies, frameworks, and tools were translated and contextualised for use within China. Institutional practices and experience from SZPU were documented and reformulated so that they could circulate through international platforms. Other initiatives involved joint development of new resources with UNESCO entities and international partners. These processes positioned the university as both a knowledge user and a knowledge contributor. They also required a process of translation between different institutional and policy contexts. Local practice had to be articulated in terms that could be understood beyond its original setting, while international frameworks had to be interpreted in relation to the Chinese TVET context. Knowledge cooperation therefore involved selection, adaptation, codification, and collaborative production.

International convening constituted a fourth form of cooperation. Through forums, workshops, seminars, and other multilateral activities, SZPU brought together UNESCO entities, TVET institutions, policymakers, researchers, industry representatives, and other partners. Convening gave the university an intermediary role within a wider network of relationships. It created spaces for institutions from different systems to exchange practices, identify common concerns, and establish connections for subsequent collaboration. In some cases, these interactions developed into more structured partnerships, joint projects, or capacity-development activities. The convening function therefore extended beyond event organisation and contributed to the formation and maintenance of relationships among actors within the broader UNESCO-related TVET community.

The four forms were closely interconnected in practice, with participation in UNESCO programmes often linking to project implementation, knowledge production, capacity development, and partnership building. Through these overlapping forms of cooperation, the institution performed multiple roles across UNESCO-related programmes and networks, giving the relationship a multidimensional character.

4.3. Organisational Mechanisms Sustaining Cooperation

The continuity of SZPU's UNESCO-related cooperation was supported by the gradual institutionalisation of international engagement within the university. Formal platforms such as the UNEVOC Centre, the Asia–Africa platform and, later, the UNESCO Chair provided relatively stable organisational anchors across changing projects and priorities. They maintained points of contact and gave successive activities a continuing institutional basis. Their operation also depended on a coordinating function that connected external programme requirements with internal structures and resources. This involved interpreting programme expectations, maintaining communication with partners, identifying relevant expertise and translating broad collaborative intentions into workable institutional arrangements. In this way, formal platforms and coordination worked together to give continuity to cooperation across otherwise separate activities.

At the same time, the substantive content of cooperation could not be handled by the coordinating function alone. Relevant expertise was distributed across different schools, departments and individual specialists, and the requirements of projects varied across areas such as research, training, digital transformation and institutional development. Continued participation therefore depended on the ability to identify and engage appropriate expertise as the focus of cooperation changed. The organisational pattern that emerged combined a relatively stable coordinating function with professional knowledge distributed across the institution.

Continuity was also reinforced through accumulated relationships and institutional experience. Repeated participation in the UNEVOC Network and related programmes created recurring contact with UNESCO entities and partner institutions, and earlier collaborations often provided a basis for later exchanges, joint activities and new connections. Familiarity with partners reduced the need to rebuild working relationships for each activity. These processes were supported by wider institutional conditions, including leadership endorsement, financial resources and administrative assistance, which enabled the university to maintain its organisational platforms and support participation across different units. Taken together, these elements allowed experience, relationships and institutional resources generated through previous cooperation to remain available for subsequent work.

4.4. Practical Demands for Sustained Cooperation

As cooperation became more extensive, two practical demands became increasingly prominent: maintaining active relationships across a widening partnership network and adapting institutionally grounded knowledge for use in different contexts.

Sustaining the partnership network required continued opportunities for partners to work together around substantive activities. Forums and workshops provided initial points of contact, while subsequent cooperation increasingly included joint programmes, capacity-building activities, peer learning, formal agreements, and regional cooperation platforms. This pattern gave relationships a more continuous basis for interaction and made it possible for partners to reconnect through specific areas of work. Network maintenance therefore depended on creating recurring forms of collaboration that could carry relationships beyond individual activities.

International knowledge contribution created a different practical demand. Many of SZPU's practices were embedded in the policy, institutional, and industry context of Chinese vocational education. Making such experience useful internationally required the underlying principles to be separated from the specific forms through which they had been implemented locally. Codification and abstraction became important in this process, particularly in the development of practical guides, case studies, toolkits, and other

knowledge resources. This allowed institutional experience to be presented in forms that retained its substantive lessons while leaving space for adaptation to different policy and institutional settings.

Both demands became more salient as cooperation expanded into longer-term partnerships, capacity development, and knowledge production. Sustaining cooperation increasingly involved maintaining continuity in relationships and making institutional experience usable across contexts.

5. Discussion

5.1. Multilateral Engagement as a Pathway for Vocational Education Internationalisation

The case brings into view a form of vocational education internationalisation that has received comparatively limited attention in research on Chinese vocational education: sustained institutional engagement with international organisations and their networks. Existing studies have documented a broad expansion of international activity, including overseas provision, the international dissemination of curricula and standards, teacher mobility, digital platforms, and partnerships involving governments, institutions and enterprises [3,8-10]. Cooperation with international organisations adds a multilateral form of institutional participation to this landscape. Vocational institutions become involved in programmes and networks that bring together international organisations, peer institutions and other actors from different countries around shared areas of work and wider VET agendas.

This form of engagement draws attention to a dimension of internationalisation that extends beyond individual cross-border activities. Participation in an international network can provide a continuing institutional basis for cooperation even as particular projects, partners and topics change. In the present case, this continuity allowed different forms of cooperation to develop within the same broader relationship and enabled experience and relationships generated in earlier activities to remain relevant to later ones. Internationalisation can therefore involve institutional participation in multilateral structures, alongside overseas provision, bilateral partnerships and other forms of cross-border cooperation. For Chinese vocational education, this perspective extends analysis beyond the expansion of international activities to the institutional relationships that connect vocational institutions with wider international networks, collaborative initiatives and knowledge exchange.

5.2. Institutional Participation in International Knowledge Production and Circulation

Engagement with international organisations creates opportunities for vocational institutions to participate in the production and circulation of international knowledge. Existing research has highlighted the role of international organisations as producers and transmitters of educational knowledge, as well as their influence on policy agendas and policy transfer [2,20]. At the institutional level, these knowledge processes require interpretation and adaptation across contexts. International strategies, frameworks and tools need to be related to particular institutional and policy settings before they can inform practice. Institutional experience, in turn, needs to be selected, codified and explained before it can contribute meaningfully to international exchange. Institutional participation may also extend to the joint development of guides, tools, training resources and other knowledge products with international partners.

In Chinese vocational education, institutional practices are often closely tied to particular policy arrangements, industry structures and organisational conditions. Their international circulation therefore requires abstraction and contextual explanation. What can travel across contexts is often the underlying principle, method or design choice, rather than the original practice in its entirety. Cooperation with international organisations can provide a setting in which locally grounded experience is reformulated for wider use while international frameworks are interpreted in relation to specific institutional contexts. Vocational institutions thereby participate in applying international

knowledge as well as shaping how knowledge is adapted, articulated and developed within international VET cooperation.

5.3. Institutional Capacity for Sustained Engagement with International Organisations

Sustained engagement with international organisations requires a combination of institutional capacities that operate across successive projects and forms of cooperation. First, institutions need continuity in coordination. A stable coordinating function preserves institutional memory, maintains contact with external partners and develops familiarity with the procedures and working practices of international organisations, allowing new activities to build on previous experience. Second, sustained engagement requires the capacity to mobilise expertise from across the institution. International cooperation may move across different substantive areas, while relevant knowledge is often dispersed among academic units and individual specialists; effective participation therefore depends on identifying and assembling appropriate expertise as the content of cooperation changes. Third, institutions need relational capacity to maintain and renew external partnerships. Repeated collaboration builds familiarity and working relationships, but these relationships remain active through substantive opportunities for continued cooperation and can also become channels to new partners and programmes. Furthermore, these capacities depend on an internal support base that gives international work sufficient resources and legitimacy. Leadership endorsement, financial support and administrative arrangements enable coordinating teams to sustain external commitments and involve colleagues from other parts of the institution.

Research on international partnerships and VET internationalisation has identified organisational arrangements, external relationships, resources and professional competences as important conditions for sustained international activity [4,16,17]. The present case suggests that their significance lies partly in how they are carried across successive forms of cooperation. Accumulated relationships and experience provide continuity, while access to expertise and internal support allows institutions to respond as the substance and demands of cooperation change. Sustained engagement therefore depends on the capacity to carry forward what has been built through previous cooperation and to reorganise institutional resources around new opportunities.

6. Conclusion

This study examined sustained engagement between a Chinese vocational education institution and an international organisation from an institutional perspective. The findings show that engagement with international organisations can form a continuing pathway of vocational education internationalisation, connecting institutions with multilateral programmes, networks and wider international agendas. Such engagement can also involve vocational institutions in the production and circulation of international knowledge, as international frameworks are interpreted in institutional settings and institutionally grounded experience is reformulated for wider use. Sustaining these relationships requires institutional capacity to preserve experience and external relationships across successive activities while mobilising appropriate expertise as the focus of cooperation changes.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study examines a single institution and focuses specifically on its engagement with UNESCO-related programmes and networks. The patterns identified may therefore reflect features of UNESCO's programme and network structures as well as the Chinese vocational education context in which the case is situated. The researchers' insider position provided detailed access to the development and operation of the cooperation, but it may also have influenced interpretation despite the use of documentary evidence for triangulation. Documentation was also less extensive for the earlier years of the case, which limited the level of detail available for reconstructing some stages of the relationship.

Future research could compare vocational institutions with different forms of engagement with international organisations, including cooperation with organisations

operating through different programme and partnership models. Comparative studies across countries could also examine how national policy environments and institutional structures shape these relationships. Such work would help assess which patterns identified in this case are transferable across contexts and which remain contingent on particular organisations and institutional settings.

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