

Current Status, Challenges, and Optimization Paths of China-Malaysia International Education Exchange Under The Belt and Road Initiative

Tan, Jiabei^{1*}

¹School of Business and Management, Lincoln University College

*Corresponding author: TAN, JIABEI , *Corresponding email: 18560000935@163.com

HOW TO CITE:

Tan, Jiabei (2026). Current Status, Challenges, and Optimization Paths of China-Malaysia International Education Exchange Under The Belt and Road Initiative. International Journal of Special Education, 41(18s), 34-48

ABSTRACT:

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded the strategic significance of higher education cooperation between China and Malaysia. While the bilateral relationship predates the BRI, the initiative has provided a stronger policy frame for student mobility, transnational education, joint research, language and cultural exchange, and university-to-university partnership. This paper examines the current status, major challenges, and optimization paths of China-Malaysia international education exchange under the BRI. Conceptually, the article links higher education internationalization, regional knowledge-network theory, and BRI policy studies. Methodologically, it combines close reading with a curated bibliometric review of fifty Scopus-indexed or Scopus-oriented works published between 2004 and 2023, covering four thematic domains: higher education internationalization (28%), Malaysia and transnational education (24%), BRI and regionalism (26%), and collaborative science (22%). Three conceptual network visualizations are used to map the structure of the review corpus. The analysis identifies three structural shifts: first, cooperation has moved beyond conventional student exchange to include branch-campus development and joint-programme provision; second, research co-authorship between Chinese and Malaysian institutions has grown but remains concentrated in STEM disciplines; third, quality-assurance negotiation and digitally mediated partnership have emerged as priority concerns in the post-2016 literature. Yet the relationship remains uneven in capacity, visibility, and institutional depth. Key constraints include differences in policy coordination, unequal research infrastructures, quality-assurance pressures, overconcentration in a small number of institutions and disciplines, and the need to align national priorities with regional aspirations. The paper argues that sustainable improvement depends on four linked strategies: establishing bilateral accreditation protocols for joint programmes, extending institutional participation beyond flagship universities through discipline-specific consortia, formalizing mutual credit-recognition procedures, and piloting shared digital platforms to

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support hybrid research collaboration.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; China-Malaysia relations; higher education internationalization; student mobility; bibliometric review; regional knowledge networks

1. Introduction

Higher education has become one of the most prominent instruments of cultural exchange and strategic engagement in the contemporary Asia-Pacific context. Universities not only produce graduates and scholarship, but are increasingly asked to function as diplomatic actors, economic contributors, and symbolic representatives of national strength. This is particularly true in Asia, where higher education has acquired additional significance through its links to regional integration, talent competition, infrastructure-led development, and geopolitical realignment.

Diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia were established in 1974 and have since developed on the basis of trade, ethnic ties, and political alignment. Educational exchange between the two countries was already active well before the BRI entered public discourse. The significant number of the Malaysian population that is made up of Chinese people (approximately 22.6% according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia's 2020 Population and Housing Census) has served as a strong social base for studying the language in educational institutions, whereas state scholarships through China Scholarship Council (CSC) have been promoting graduate mobility since the 1990s. In this sense, the BRI did not initiate educational exchange between the two countries but provided a stronger institutional and policy frame for connections that were already in place.

Several considerations make China–Malaysia higher education linkages particularly worth examining. China and Malaysia have continued to maintain strong political and economic ties. However, their interaction in terms of higher education institutions has grown in magnitude since 2013. As Malaysia continues to strive to establish itself as a centre for higher education

and China assumes increasing importance in regional higher education systems, along with the impetus gained from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), various opportunities for engagement have been established, ranging from dual degree programs to branch campus operations and collaborative research.

Three core questions frame the discussion. Firstly, how can the major forms, institutions, and disciplines of educational exchanges between China and Malaysia within the context of BRI be identified? Secondly, what constraints exist at the policy level, institutional level, and structural level that hinder deeper collaboration between the two countries? Lastly, what optimization measures are viable given the disparities between the two systems?

On the other hand, there are inherent asymmetries within the bilateral relationship that need to be scrutinized carefully. There is increased exchange, yet it is still unequal. A few organizations have a dominant presence; not all collaboration produces results that sustain scientific research; and quality control, accreditation, and policy compatibility continue to be major issues. Indeed, BRI discourse frequently makes claims that are more extensive than any institutional capacity can fulfill. The task for analysis is thus to transcend any positive representation of such relations and analyze how collaboration functions in reality.

This study tries to address the above issue by analyzing the current situation, issues, and ways to optimize the international education exchanges between China and Malaysia under the BRI framework. The main thesis of the paper is that although the era of BRI cooperation has strengthened the legitimacy of bilateral exchange at a policy level, future success cannot be assured through the adoption of grand diplomatic slogans but rather needs proper institutional arrangement. Sustainable

improvement calls for better recognition mechanism, wider participation, research-mobility integration, and digital cooperation.

Organization of the Paper. The paper proceeds in the following sections. Section 2 gives an overview of the existing literature under four different themes. Section 3 provides the conceptual framework of the study. Section 4 highlights the methodology used for conducting the bibliometric analysis. Section 5 provides the analysis of the literature through a bibliometric approach.

2. Literature Review

Four distinct but overlapping fields can be identified within the pertinent body of literature. First is the field of higher education internationalization. Internationalization was initially conceptualized by Knight (2004) and Knight & Altbach (2007) through the notion that higher education internationalization entails the incorporation of international and intercultural aspects into the core activities of higher education institutions. The literature that followed focused on internationalization's unequal geographies, its linkages to ranking and market competition, and the need for an ethical approach rather than just quantitative growth (Hazelkorn, 2015; de Wit, 2020; van der Wende, 2017).

Buckner and Stein (2020) and Mok et al. (2021) highlight the uneven impact of the COVID-19 crisis on internationalization strategies, showing that institutions with more advanced digital capacities proved notably resilient amid disrupted mobility. The above discussion is especially pertinent to China-Malaysia collaboration, seeing how the years of the coronavirus pandemic (34-48) brought both disruption and innovation.

The second thematic cluster deals with issues related to student mobility, transnational education, and regional hubs of higher education. Li & Bray (2007) explored cross-border student movements using push-and-pull models, whereas Brooks & Waters (2011) examined the social embeddedness of student mobility through reproduction, aspiration, and

migration theories. Research on branch campuses and transnational education, such as that done by Knight (2016) and Wilkins & Huisman (2011, 2012), has strong applicability in terms of Malaysia due to the fact that Malaysia has been pursuing the hub approach in order to lure foreign institutions as well as international students. Sidhu (2011) and Sirat (2010) can be cited as additional examples in this regard.

There have been notable successes with Malaysia's hub concept. As of 2019, approximately 130,000 international students were enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, Statistics of Higher Education 2019, published 2020), while foreign branch campuses from the UK and Australia operate alongside a network of private colleges providing twinning and articulation courses (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2020). Such an arrangement has made Malaysia a highly welcoming place for such collaborations, even those involving China.

The third set deals with regionalism, China-ASEAN studies, and BRI studies. While not being necessarily educational, BRI studies play an important role in analyzing the context of China-Malaysia policy exchanges. There are opposing views regarding the significance of BRI initiatives. According to Huang (2016) and Yu (2017), it is an economic project. For Callahan (2016), the project serves geopolitical and ideational purposes. According to Jones and Zeng (2019), the BRI should be perceived more in terms of an evolving policy framework rather than a comprehensive strategy or plan. On top of that, the idea of inclusive globalization was suggested by Liu and Dunford (2016) as yet another way to look at the nature of connectivity promoted through the BRI. In all cases, these divergent understandings of what the BRI entails have implications for higher education since universities can be perceived in terms of their function as providers of human capital or soft power.

Another fourth group focuses on collaboration and scientific networks. The work of Wagner &

Leydesdorff (2005), Adams (2013), Wagner (2018), and Wang & Barabási (2021) show that today's research is coordinated using increasingly complex networks, not separate national research systems. Within Asian regions, these networks intersect with various policy projects, talent initiatives, linguistic frameworks, and digital networks. When it comes to China-Malaysia relations, this implies that the benefits of cooperation will hinge not only on the relationship between the two nations but also on their capacity for linking mobility, teaching, and research within regional networks.

While rich in literature, there remain three gaps that can be observed in these fields. The first one is that studies on internationalization consider Southeast Asia as a whole region rather than examining the dynamics of bilateral relationships between two countries like China-Malaysia. The second gap is related to studies on BRI, where education has been considered as part of people-to-people connectivity. Moreover, the policy evolution of BRI education cooperation itself—its shift from declarative framing to institutional mechanisms—has rarely been traced systematically in bilateral studies. Third, scholarship that centers on Malaysia has yielded extensive research into national reforms of higher education and governance of transnational higher education, but this scholarship often does not relate the policies of Malaysian institutions to the logic of the BRI policy or to the evolving research connections between Malaysia and China. This study will rectify this by combining the four areas of scholarship and adopting a bibliometric approach for analyzing gaps in the literature.

2.1 Policy Evolution of BRI Education Cooperation

BRI-related education cooperation has passed through three broadly identifiable phases. The initial phase (2013–2015) was largely declarative: the 2013 launch of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" initiatives was followed by general references to people-to-people exchange, without a dedicated

education policy document. The institutionalization phase (2016–2019) was marked by the Chinese Ministry of Education's Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2016), which for the first time set out concrete targets for student mobility, joint schooling, language cooperation, and talent cultivation with partner countries. During this period, Xiamen University Malaysia Campus opened (2016), CSC scholarship quotas for BRI countries expanded, and bilateral education MoUs between China and Malaysia increased noticeably. The consolidation and recalibration phase (2020–present) has been shaped by the COVID-19 disruption of physical mobility and the subsequent turn toward digital and hybrid cooperation, reflected in the 2020 Guidelines on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening-Up of Education in the New Era jointly issued by eight Chinese ministries. This phased evolution indicates that the BRI education agenda has shifted from rhetorical framing toward operational mechanisms, although implementation depth varies considerably across bilateral relationships.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employed by the authors of this study regards the China-Malaysia education exchange as a multi-layered process where the elements of policy coordination, institutional collaboration, mobility, and research collaboration are interconnected. On the policy level, the BRI forms a legitimizing framework that enables cooperation and resource mobilization, publicity, and coordination across ministries. On the institutional level, universities translate the framework into tangible tools like dual-degree programs, student exchange programs, visiting scholars programs, research centers, and quality assurance mechanisms. On the practice level, students, teachers, and administrators implement exchange through mobility, teaching collaboration, curriculum development, language training, and collaborative research.

Each level can be observed through its own set of indicators. For example, policy alignment

could be measured based on bilateral treaties, ministerial pronouncements, and budgeting processes. Institutional partnership can be observed from the total number of collaboration programs, articulations, branch campus establishment, and supervisor partnerships. On the practice level, exchange is quantified by the total number of students enrolled, graduates, faculty exchange rates, publications, and collaborative platforms. These indicators are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

The conceptual basis of this study borrows from the ideas behind regional knowledge networking. According to Castells (2010) and Wagner (2018), the process of knowledge creation and sharing is conducted in networks that transcend national borders. Malaysia is especially significant in such a context, as it represents a national system, a prospective regional center, and a transnational mediator of education. China's role in the framework can be attributed to its position as both a source and destination for the exchange of knowledge and

as a partner in developing regional knowledge sharing frameworks.

Most importantly, the framework has also considered the issue of moderating factors. First, trust and quality assurance will determine whether the partnership could transition from merely being symbolic to being academically valid. Issues of mutual recognition of credit points, program standards, supervision processes, and integrity in research will be very important in ensuring continuity. Secondly, there is the issue of the broader context. Bilateral cooperation cannot exist in a vacuum; it exists within the context of wider regional rivalry, linguistic diversity, employment requirements, and the increasing relevance of the digital and blended methods of instruction through virtual exchanges, shared Learning Management Systems, and webinars, among others. Indeed, the coronavirus outbreak has pushed institutions to familiarize themselves with such modes of collaboration, although their utilization varies from university to university in both nations.

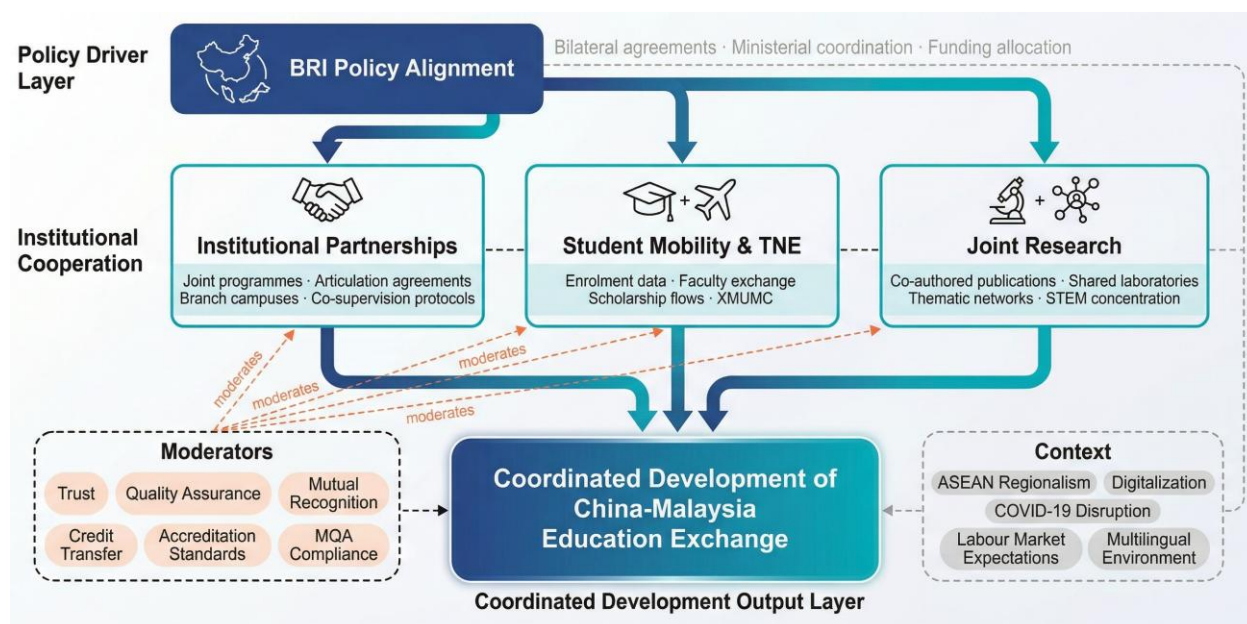


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for BRI-enabled China–Malaysia education exchange.

Note. Arrows indicate directional influence; dashed lines indicate moderation. Developed by the author.

This theory is illustrated in Figure 1. Alignment of policies between the BRI and institutional

collaboration leads to mobility, branch campuses, and research collaboration, which in turn determine the collaborative development of Sino-Malaysian exchanges. The model seeks to illustrate not only progress but also unevenness, where cooperation is enhanced when policies

and institutions are mutually supportive but becomes vulnerable when policies exceed their institutions.

4. Methodology and Bibliometric Design

The approach used in this paper entails qualitative synthesis and a selected bibliometric approach. The objective of the paper does not seek to assert that all records found on Scopus regarding China, Malaysia, BRI, and higher education have been covered. On the contrary, the objective is to compile an intellectually coherent review base to address the research question. Fifty articles were selected through a three-stage procedure adapted from PRISMA 2020 reporting principles (Page et al., 2021), covering identification, screening, and eligibility, followed by a targeted hand-search step to retain essential Malaysia-specific policy case studies that fell below the citation threshold. The first step involved searching in Scopus in October 2023 using the following search strings applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields:

"internationalization of higher education," "transnational education" AND "Malaysia," "Belt and Road" AND "higher education," and "research collaboration network" AND "Asia." The four queries returned 2,418 records in total. After removing 262 duplicates across queries, 2,156 unique records entered the screening stage. For the second phase, records were screened using three criteria: citation threshold (minimum 50 citations for works published before 2018 and minimum 15 for those from 2018 to 2023), substantive relevance to at least one of the four research questions, and thematic balance across the four domains. Editorials, book reviews, and conference abstracts were excluded at this stage. For the third phase, manual filtering included articles that had received fewer citations than others due to their low number of citations despite being relevant and crucial to analysis, including case studies related specifically to the Malaysian policies. The selection flow is summarised in Figure 2 below, following a simplified PRISMA-style layout.

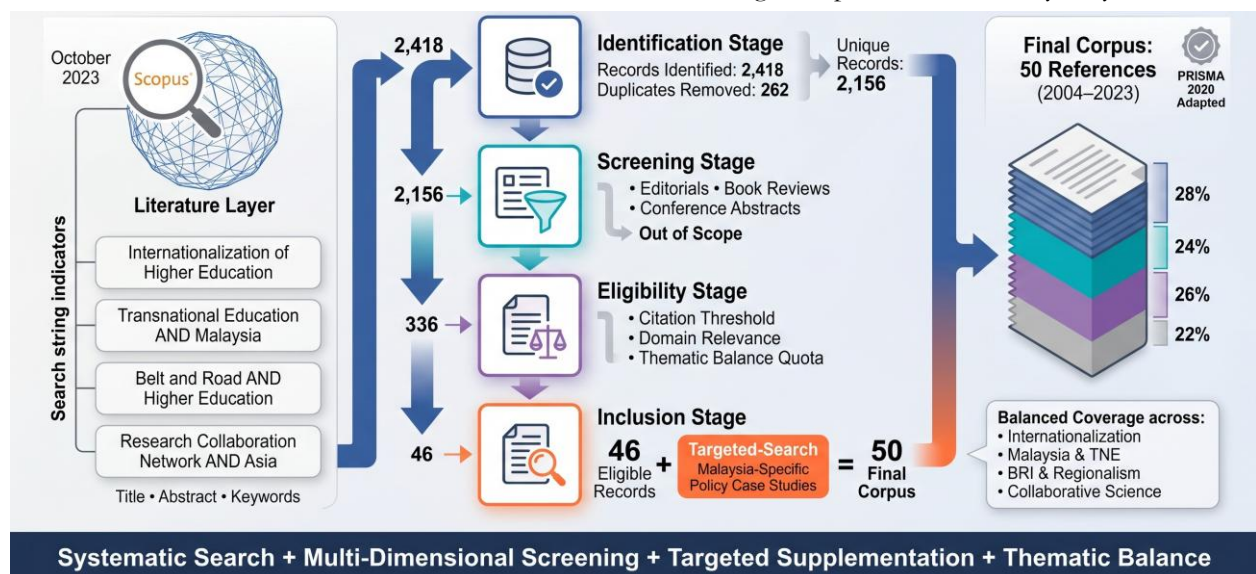


Figure 2. Simplified PRISMA-style flow of study selection.

Note. Adapted from Page et al. (2021).

Developed by the author.

The flow clarifies that the final corpus of 50 items was not produced by a single citation-based cut-off. Citation thresholds reduced a large pool of candidate records, but thematic balance and domain coverage also acted as selection filters, and a small number of policy-

focused sources were retained on substantive grounds. This is consistent with the curated-corpus rationale discussed below, and should not be read as a full systematic review.

This list of 50 references will not be comprehensive but conceptually balanced and analytically adequate for the purposes of this paper.

These figures should be read as conceptual thematic maps of the review corpus, not as the output of a full database export. The difference between these two is not in terms of protection but methodologically speaking. An export from Scopus will entail a completely different process since access to the tool and methodology of sampling are different. In the context of this article, however, a curated-corpus method is more appropriate, since the article aims to explain how the literature coheres into themes that can interpret China-Malaysia relations under BRI.

Three kinds of bibliometric approach are employed. Firstly, a keyword occurrence map segments the entire corpus into three themes, namely, BRI policy, higher education, and research and innovation. Secondly, a theme development map illustrates the shift in the literature center of gravity from general internationalization to BRI, quality assurance, regional cooperation, and digital cooperation. Third, a map emphasizing authorship reveals the traditions of origin behind each field. Network maps have been produced by hand, using information about domains and keywords derived from the coding of the 50 sources. The size of nodes corresponds to how often they were cited in the corpus, and edges are formed when keywords appear together in the same source. The current research technique aligns with the methodologies used in a narrative and integrative review of literature (Snyder, 2019). This method of thematic analysis is different from a systematic analysis using bibliometrics since the latter uses a complete extraction of the database content. The charts are read along with close readings for interpretation purposes.

From an analytical perspective, the codes used to analyze each article were categorized according to their primary domain, year of publication, and their pertinence to one of the four research questions: Which model of internationalization is implied? Which cross-border activity or mobility model receives the most attention? How do BRI and China-ASEAN relations fit into the analysis? Finally,

which institutions seem to play a critical role in ensuring bilateral cooperation?

The coding process was carried out by the researcher and then checked internally by assessing each reference based on the four main questions a fortnight later. In cases where a reference was applicable to more than one question, the references were coded according to their primary and secondary relevance. A major weakness is the absence of formal inter-coder reliability testing. To partially address this limitation, the researcher re-coded the entire corpus after a two-week interval. Discrepancies in domain assignment were found in six references; these were resolved by re-reading each source and assigning the domain that best matched its stated research question.

5. Bibliometric Reading of the Corpus

Figure 2 highlights the co-occurrence network of keywords for the curated review corpus. There are three distinct clusters observable in Figure 2. The first cluster relates to BRI, while the second cluster represents the terminology associated with internationalization in higher education. Terms like policy, ASEAN, connectivity, and regional cooperation belong to the first cluster. The third cluster centers around research and innovation, which include joint research, talent, digital collaboration, and knowledge network. Perhaps the most interesting connections can be seen among the clusters mentioned above. It is not enough for policy to have a connection to results; it works only in conjunction with partnership, quality assurance, and research capabilities. In other words, the BRI discourse opens up new possibilities, but the institutional design defines how the cooperation will deepen.

In particular, the phrase “quality assurance” links the BRI policy cluster with the higher education cluster, thus suggesting that issues related to credibility are a consistent topic of discussion when policy-based collaboration interacts with institutionalized execution. In turn, the term “talent” unites the BRI policy cluster with the research and innovation cluster. On the other hand, the association between the

higher education cluster and the innovation and research cluster relies largely on partnerships and knowledge networks, indicating that

institutional partnerships are the key to transforming mobility-based cooperation into research-based cooperation.

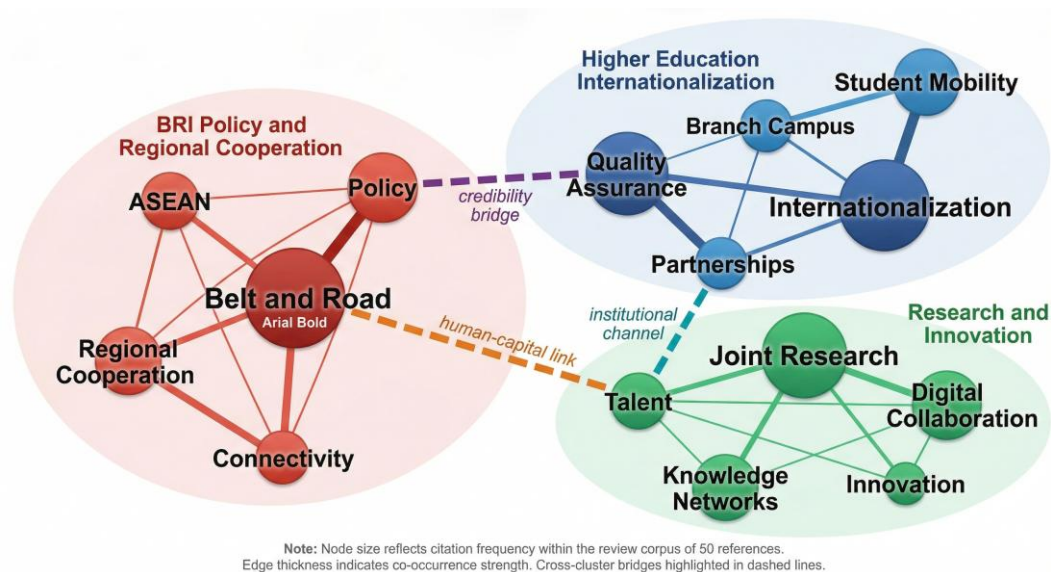


Figure 3. Keyword co-occurrence map of the review corpus ($n = 50$).

Note. Node size reflects citation frequency; edge thickness reflects co-occurrence strength. Coded manually, not an automated software output. Developed by the author.

Figure 3 takes a temporal dimension into account. The most salient topics in the early part of the corpus were those of internationalization and student mobility. Towards the 2010s period, the topic of Malaysia-hub and transnational education began to emerge as well, mirroring national strategies aimed at bringing foreign educational providers to Malaysia. Post-2016, BRI-related discourse emerged at the forefront, followed by quality assurance and digital cooperation. The thematic development is significant as it demonstrates that the China-

Malaysia interaction has changed from a rather limited mobility-based interaction to a broader ecosystem comprising policy-making, institution-building, and research collaboration.

The 23 out of 50 sources included in the corpus have been published during the period from 2016 to 2023, of which 18 directly address the topics associated with BRI. At the same time, only four of the total 27 sources published prior to 2016 touch upon the issue of BRI or China-ASEAN connectivity.

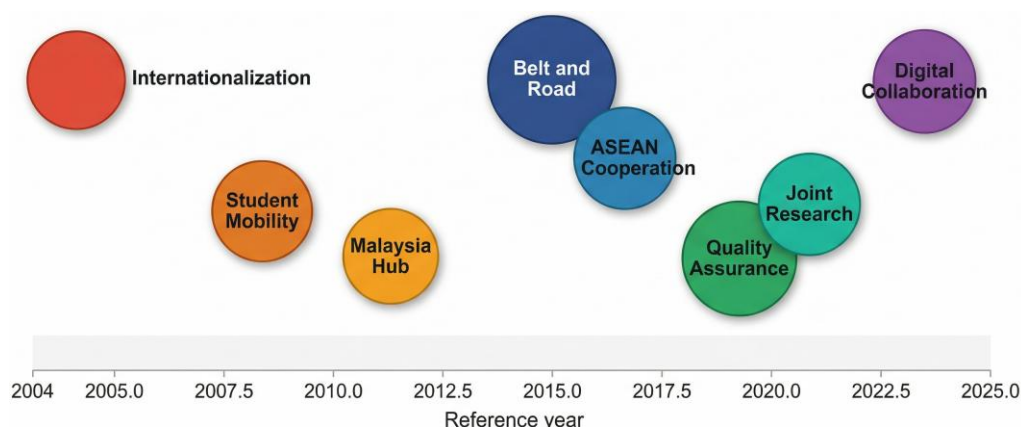


Figure 4. Thematic evolution of the reference corpus, 2004–2023 ($n = 50$).

Note. Horizontal axis = publication year; bubble size is illustrative, not to scale. Developed by the author.

Figure 4 shows the traditions of authors and sources from which the review draws its theoretical foundations. The internationalization tradition consists of the theories of Knight, Altbach, and de Wit, the Malaysian and transnational-education tradition is represented by the work of Sirat, Arokiasamy, Wilkins, and Mok, while the BRI and regional policy tradition is made up of the work of Huang, Yu, and Liu, as well as Dunford. The existence of such traditions makes one of the key arguments of this paper clear, namely that China-Malaysia

cooperation in the context of the BRI requires multiple perspectives.

Interestingly, there seems to be minimal cross-fertilization of ideas between the two groups of scholars. While scholars who write about internationalization of higher education (Knight, Altbach, de Wit) pay little attention to studies conducted within the BRI governance framework, scholars who study the latter (Huang, Yu, Jones and Zeng) make no references to works within the internationalization framework. Scholars who focus on Malaysia find themselves somewhere in the middle, as they sometimes apply the theory of internationalization, but are also interested in regional policy-related debates.

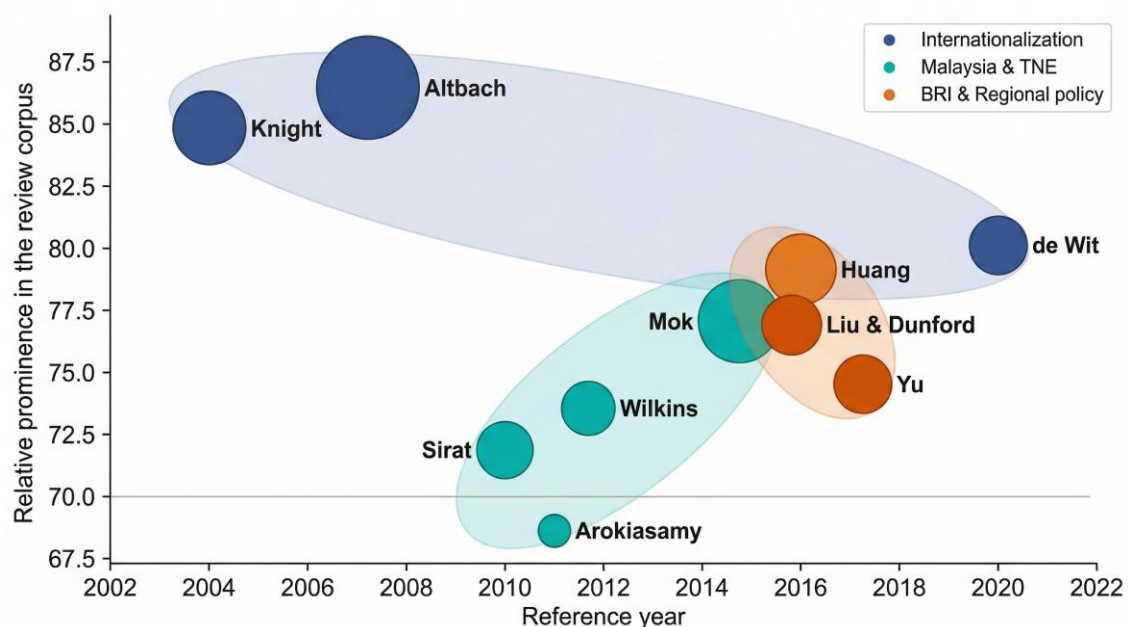


Figure 5. Author prominence map of the review corpus (n = 50).

Note. Prominence reflects citation frequency within the corpus; values are relative, not generalizable beyond this sample. Developed by the author.

When taken together, the findings from these bibliometric trends seem to paint a more complex picture of the situation. The literature clearly shows that the BRI itself does not guarantee the automatic success of educational

cooperation. Instead, what emerges from the literature is that cooperation gains significance when policies are turned into institutions, and this includes diversification of cooperation, reciprocating mobility, greater clarity on quality assurance, and enhanced research cooperation. In situations where translation into institutions is still weak, the BRI serves more of a diplomatic function.

Table 1. Distribution of the review corpus by thematic domain (n = 50).

Domain	Illustrative authors	Primary contribution	Share in corpus	Representative finding	Key limitation
Internationalization	Knight; Altbach; de Wit; Teichler	Defines mobility, partnership, and institutional strategy	28%	Internationalization has shifted from quantitative expansion toward ethical and qualitative concerns	Limited attention to bilateral dynamics in Southeast Asia
Malaysia and TNE	Sirat; Wilkins; Arokiasamy; Mok	Explains hub strategy, transnational provision, and policy reform	24%	Malaysia hosted over 130,000 international students by 2019 through its hub strategy	National policy studies rarely connect to BRI logic or China-specific dynamics
BRI and regionalism	Huang; Yu; Liu & Dunford; Callahan	Frames policy alignment, connectivity, and China-ASEAN context	26%	The BRI functions as a flexible policy umbrella rather than a single master plan	Education is discussed as a secondary dimension; institutional mechanisms are underspecified
Collaborative science	Wagner; Adams; Wang & Barabási	Clarifies networked research and partnership sustainability	22%	International co-authorship in Asia grew at 8–10% annually between 2010 and 2020	Research network analysis seldom addresses bilateral China-Malaysia patterns specifically

6. Discussion: Current Status, Challenges, and Optimization Paths

The current state of China-Malaysia academic exchange presents a mixed picture of expanding scope alongside persistent structural constraints. Cooperation has moved beyond its earlier focus on scholarly exchange and language learning to cover a considerably broader range of activities. Besides, Malaysia enjoys a relatively rich ecology of higher education. Continuously, Chinese students still consider Malaysia a nearby destination regionally speaking, and Malaysian academic institutions and policy makers see value in the connection with China as means to

diversify their markets, conduct research collaboration, and build links regionally. BRI has also politicized this connection and made universities consider its implementation strategically and not individually. The phased evolution of BRI education policy (see Section 2.1) also helps explain why cooperation intensity varies over time: the 2016 Education Action Plan marked a turning point, while the post-2020 digital turn reshaped the modes through which China–Malaysia exchange operates.

The quantitative criteria allow for the definition of the extent of the exchanges involved. According to the Malaysian Ministry of Higher

Education's Statistics of Higher Education 2019 (published 2020), approximately 15,700 Chinese students were enrolled at Malaysian higher education institutions in 2019, making China one of the top source countries alongside Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nigeria. These figures cover both public and private institutions but exclude short-term exchange students and language-course enrollees, which suggests the actual number of Chinese learners in Malaysia is somewhat higher. Scholarships, such as CSC grants and those offered by the Malaysian government, facilitate some of this student mobility; however, most Chinese students studying in Malaysia come at their own expense due to low tuition costs compared to Western countries and the provision of courses in English and Chinese. On the institutional front, as of 2021 there were six Confucius Institutes hosted by Malaysian universities (Hanban / Chinese International Education Foundation public listings, 2021), while bilateral university-to-university collaboration agreements exceeded 200 according to figures compiled by the Chinese Ministry of Education's Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges (2021). The agreement count should be read with caution, as it includes MoUs of varying operational depth, from active dual-degree programmes to dormant paper-level memoranda. The branch campus activity pertinent to the bilateral connection is highlighted by the Xiamen University Malaysia Campus (XMUMC), which commenced operations in 2016 and marks the first branch campus of any Chinese university overseas.

XMUMC is a significant case for several reasons. First, XMUMC broke the trend where universities in the West set up branches in Asian countries. Second, it showed that Chinese universities were capable of delivering transnational education, not just sending students abroad. Third, it posed operational issues such as curricula localization, language of instruction, quality control under Malaysian jurisdiction, and sustainability of enrollment in the face of competition from local and international universities. As of the 2022–2023

academic year, XMUMC reported an enrollment of approximately 6,000 students across multiple faculties, according to figures disclosed on the campus's official website and annual admissions briefing (Xiamen University Malaysia Campus, 2023). This includes both undergraduate and postgraduate enrollees and mixes Malaysian, Chinese, and other international students, though a detailed nationality breakdown is not publicly released. However, the long-term success of the branch will depend on its ability to do research besides teaching.

However, there are several problems left unresolved. The first issue is related to policy coordination being weaker than described in the official rhetoric. Bilateral memoranda of understanding (MoUs) typically articulate intentions without specifying operational procedures. A student-exchange MoU, for instance, may omit provisions on credit transfer volume, language proficiency requirements, co-supervision responsibilities, and cost-sharing arrangements. Mok and Han (2016) reported that although cross-border arrangements between China and Malaysia were fairly developed, there was still tension due to the differences in the academic calendars, grading system, and thesis examination process. Secondly, the concentration of institutions is rather high. Few universities, disciplines, and urban settings are responsible for the bulk of exchanges that have been recorded. This is particularly true in Malaysia, where the University of Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and Universiti Sains Malaysia are mainly involved in research partnerships with Chinese counterparts, while others play a marginal role. In China, too, collaboration is limited to a select few research-focused universities located in the coastal regions that have prior connections with Southeast Asian countries, including Xiamen University, Sun Yat-Sen University, and Kunming University of Science and Technology. As a result, there exists a two-tier structure whereby only a few institutions gain experience in partnerships, whereas others are unable to do so due to a variety of reasons. Third, quality

assurance is still crucial. Internationalization is a key strength of the Malaysian model; however, it also entails credibility challenges for branch campuses, joint programs, and other modes of transnational provision that need to be addressed through regulation. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) insists that all higher education programs, whether those delivered by branch campuses of foreign institutions or joint degree programs with Malaysian institutions, must achieve national accreditation. This form of regulation offers a quality minimum; however, it poses compliance challenges for programs operating under such conditions. Dual accreditation presents a special challenge in joint-degree programs, where the program needs to be accredited by both the Chinese and Malaysian QA agencies based on different criteria concerning credits, assessment, and qualifications of staff. Fourth, research cooperation has been increasing but still has a narrow scope and is limited to specific disciplines. A Scopus search conducted by the author in October 2023, using the affiliation filter "China" AND "Malaysia" and restricted to document types "article" and "review" for the period 2013–2023, returned approximately 8,500 co-authored publications. Disciplinary distribution was derived from Scopus's built-in subject-area classification applied to the same result set; the output is indicative rather than exact, since Scopus assigns each publication to multiple subject areas and the categories overlap. The distribution is heavily weighted towards engineering, computer sciences, material sciences, and environmental sciences, with the humanities, social sciences, and education disciplines together accounting for a markedly smaller share. In terms of the disciplines involved, the collaboration tends to strengthen the BRI partner countries' existing scientific and technological capabilities rather than enhancing their capacities in the policy-making and culture-related sectors.

The paths towards optimization should therefore start from institutional design rather than pure diplomatic considerations. First, China and Malaysia should work on improving

their policy cooperation concerning mutual recognition, standards for doctoral supervision, and accreditation of programs. More transparent processes lower the level of irritation and build trust on all sides. Such an endeavor calls for consistent bureaucratic action that moves slowly. A feasible approach would be to develop a pilot project for mutual recognition in certain disciplines where both nations have accreditation systems and there is a high demand from employers.

Second, the scope of collaboration needs to be expanded beyond the confines of a few leading universities. The inclusion of a wider range of public universities, specialized institutions, and groups of disciplines will ensure that such a bilateral collaboration is less brittle and more socially significant. Such an expansion will face obstacles due to unequal levels of resources. The majority of universities in the two regions do not have the luxury of international departments, courses offered in English, or budgets that can be used for developing new partnerships.

Third, research integration would be achieved through seed funding, supervisory cooperation, data-sharing systems, and thematic networks across institutions. Seed funding becomes especially relevant considering the fact that the fixed costs associated with setting up international collaborative research, including traveling, calibration of machines and laboratory tools, approval for research, language services, and other fixed costs, may be too high for individual academics to cover using normal research grants. Funds established by international organizations, such as NSFC and the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia, may alleviate this constraint, but such funding schemes depend on long-term financial commitments.

Fourth, digital collaboration must be viewed as fundamental infrastructure for bilateral cooperation rather than an additional component. Hybrid classes, shared online courses, collaboration platforms, and virtual research assistance can enhance resilience and

reduce obstacles for organizations based in regions beyond large urban centers. However, digital collaboration does not come without its expenses. Efficient hybrid delivery necessitates spending on platform licensing, IT staffing, broadband networks, and faculty instruction. Not all institutions in both countries have the resources to provide those conditions, and experience from the pandemic revealed that poorly implemented digital technology led to substandard educational results. A realistic initial approach may involve centrally organized pilot projects for two or three key subjects, with the platform fee covered by the bilateral education fund. The fifth area for optimization involves language support. Chinese-language learning in Malaysia is aided by the ethnic Chinese presence in Malaysia and the existence of Chinese medium schools in Malaysia; however, knowledge of Malay language and Bahasa Malaysia among Chinese students and academics is poor, hindering their ability to interact with Malay medium universities and communities. On the other hand, when Malaysian students learn in China, especially those studying at postgraduate levels, they have difficulty coping with academic Chinese. In such cases, language training programs – whether prior to leaving the home country, while abroad, or through bilingual academic writing sessions – should be provided. Another option for optimizing the exchange would be regional embedding. China-Malaysia exchange will tend to become more sustainable as part of a larger ASEAN or Asian knowledge network, not simply a success story on its own. Triangular cooperation through multilateral projects and dialogues on quality assurance would increase institutional learning beyond bilateral loops. From this perspective, perhaps the best future model would be that in which the China-Malaysia collaboration serves as a channel between national objectives and regional educational integration.

7. Conclusion

In terms of the BRI's educational exchange between China and Malaysia, there is now a level of diversification that is truly significant. While mobility remains central, the partnership has

expanded to include branch campuses, joint programmes, regional strategies, and increasingly, collaborative research. The BRI has played a key role in heightening attention to these developments through its strategic narrative and policy framework. The findings in this study reveal, nevertheless, that growth alone is not sufficient. Future research should examine whether the optimization paths proposed here produce measurable changes in program quality and research output over a five-to-ten-year period, ideally through longitudinal case studies of specific joint programmes. The selective bibliometric review points out that the discourse on internationalization has evolved from general internationalization discussions to more concrete issues such as regional governance, quality assurance, and collaborative networks.

Some shortcomings must be recognized. The first is that although the corpus contains fifty selected items which provide concept representation, it cannot be considered a comprehensive review because grey literature, policies written in Malay or Chinese, and organizational publications which are not available in Scopus databases have not been included. Another limitation is that the bibliometric graphs have been generated manually without any software application. The third limitation is that the article lacks data from institutions involved. Interviews with program coordinators, policy makers, and students would contribute significantly to the discussion of the problems as well as the possibility of taking optimal paths towards addressing them. Finally, there is the problem that the use of numbers like the number of students enrolled and the number of co-authorship relationships have been taken from public data sources that do not fully account for the informal relationships of collaboration. Any strategy for sustainability will have to incorporate these interdependent principles: policy coordination, institutional engagement, quality and recognition systems, and the systematic incorporation of research and collaborative digital technologies. These solutions won't eliminate all the disparities, yet they can contribute to moving bilateral

educational cooperation away from the current fragmented initiative-based approach to an effective and robust platform. While this platform will not be dependent on the further

promotion of the BRI discourse, its existence will require a considerable degree of institutional investment, negotiation, and most importantly, cooperation.

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