

Exploring Intercultural Competence among Students in Sino-Foreign Universities: A DMIS-Based Case Study

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Abstract: *This study explores how students at two Sino-foreign cooperative universities develop intercultural competence, using the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) as its framework. Qualitative methods, including document analysis and in-depth interviews, reveal that interactive learning environments, such as seminars and tutorials, contribute positively to students' understanding of cultural differences. The diversity of instructors enhances learning experiences, though opportunities for genuine intercultural communication remain limited. Findings suggest that most students transition from 'minimization' to 'adaptation', and some particularly in the humanities and social sciences—progress toward 'integration' within the DMIS framework.*

Keywords: intercultural competence, cultural adaptation, DMIS, Sino-foreign universities, cross-cultural learning

1. Introduction

The trend of globalization has led to greater exposure to people from different cultures, necessitating the development of new competencies to communicate across linguistic and cultural differences. To work, learn and live effectively in another culture, individuals must be interested in other cultures, be aware of cultural differences and adapt their behavior. In the era of globalization, intercultural competence is an essential competence for modern youth. OECD (2018) pointed out that young students need to learn to appreciate and benefit from cultural differences, and focus on developing their intercultural competence to cope with the changes in the labor market under the trend of globalization. Intercultural competence enables students to better understand and reflect on cultural diversity (Zlomislíć, Gverijeri, & Bugarić, 2016) and critically reflect on their own culture, from which they can develop cultural confidence. Intercultural competence should be one of the goals of higher education (Barrett et al., 2014).

The development of intercultural competence can be enhanced through the curriculum and interactions with students from different culture (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). For students who are not able to move internationally, studying at a university with a high degree of internationalization at home can be beneficial for enhancing students' intercultural competence. In mainland China, a high degree of internationalization at home is the Sino-foreign Cooperative University, which refers to the educational institutions jointly established within the territory of China by foreign educational institutions and Chinese educational institutions, with Chinese citizens as the main enrollment target. Sino-foreign cooperative universities have legal personality and independent campuses, creating a cross-cultural learning environment for students who cannot move internationally. Students enhance their understanding of cultural differences and develop

intercultural competence by participating in internationalized courses, programs, etc., enabling them to acquire skills similar to those of internationally mobile students (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

This study contributes to the discourse on internationalized education models in China and provides insights for enhancing cross-cultural learning outcomes in higher education. This study takes the students of two Sino-foreign cooperative universities as case studies and uses the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity as the theoretical framework to analyze the students' intercultural adaptation. When students enter the school to study, they have to go through a socialization process to understand the values and cultural characteristics of the school (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). The socialization process of students in Sino-foreign cooperative universities takes place in an intercultural context. There are mainly two types of this intercultural context. One is to interact with the academic culture of the school, and students experience the academic culture through their major studies. The other is to interact with people from other cultural backgrounds, that is, intercultural communication. Three research questions of this study are presented as follows:

- 1) What are the students' opinions on the school's curriculum, teaching, and evaluation?
- 2) How do students carry out their studies in this intercultural environment?
- 3) How do students engage in intercultural communication?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Elements of the Development of Intercultural Competence

The terms such as intercultural sensitivity, intercultural

competence, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural awareness, cultural fluency, and cultural literacy are to some extent interchangeable (Fantini, 2009). Among these terms, 'intercultural competence' has received more attention from scholars. Intercultural competence does not compel individuals to give up their original culture or require them to adopt other cultures. Instead, it encourages individuals to remain open and curious about other cultures and to engage in effective cooperation and interaction amidst cultural differences (Barrett, Huber, & Reynolds, 2014). It is applicable to all intercultural situations (Deardorff & Jones, 2012).

Deardorff (2009) proposed a process model of intercultural competence, which consists of five elements. Firstly, the expected external outcomes: individuals apply intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes to carry out effective and appropriate behaviors and communication, so as to achieve their goals. Secondly, the expected internal outcomes: adaptability (adapting to different communication styles and behaviors; making adjustments when facing a new cultural environment), and flexibility (selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviors; having cognitive flexibility). Thirdly, knowledge and understanding: cultural self-awareness, in-depth understanding and cognition of culture (including the context, roles and influences of culture, as well as other worldviews), specific cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. Fourthly, skills: listening, observing and interpreting, analyzing, evaluating and connecting. Finally, essential attitudes: respect (valuing other cultures and respecting cultural diversity), openness (being open to intercultural learning and people from other cultural backgrounds without making hasty judgments), and a spirit of curiosity and exploration (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty).

Bennett considers that the three most crucial elements of intercultural competence are knowledge, attitude, and behavior. These three elements need to work together to promote the development of intercultural competence (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Language is not included as an element of intercultural competence. Although proficient and advanced language skills can facilitate in-depth cultural learning (Barrett et al., 2014; Deardorff & Jones, 2012; Fantini, 2009; Zlomislíć et al., 2016), and the inability to use a second language proficiently can also limit thinking abilities (Fantini, 2009), language proficiency is not a necessary condition for enhancing intercultural competence. Some studies have shown that individuals with proficient second – language abilities may still have far – behind or insignificantly improved intercultural competence (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Jackson, 2011). Therefore, in addition to language, other elements are needed to supplement the improvement of intercultural competence. The ideal state is to combine advanced language skills with elements such as skills, knowledge, and attitude (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). Some scholars also believe that, apart from these factors, individuals should also have the ability to take action, that is, to put knowledge, attitudes, and skills into practice in intercultural situations (Barrett et al., 2014).

2.2 Cultivation of Intercultural Competence

Cultivating students' intercultural competence is one of the goals of higher education (Barrett et al., 2014). Different approaches are proposed on how to enhance intercultural competence. Barrett (2014) believes that the ways to enhance intercultural competence in a learning context include: (1) Informal learning, which occurs in personal life situations and is completed through self-initiated actions or communication with others, being spontaneous and unpredictable; (2) Non-formal education, which takes place in work or adult education settings and is completed through forms such as training and courses; (3) Formal education, which occurs in school settings and is completed through curriculums, lectures, seminars, etc. implemented according to teaching plans. Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) believe that in intercultural learning, one should take the initiative to build relationships, value people from different cultures, be good at listening and observing, handle differences, and deal with complex information. The study by Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) shows that people with three or more years of intercultural experience are more sensitive to intercultural issues than those with less experience. All in all, living in a multicultural environment and having continuous intercultural contact contribute to the cultivation of intercultural competence (Barrett et al., 2014; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

The development of intercultural competence is not limited to the classroom, but can also be achieved through extracurricular activities (OECD, 2018). Students are encouraged to enhance the intercultural competence by actively engaging in experiences, explorations and challenges, and learn to analyze, compare, reflect and collaborate in another culture (Barrett et al., 2014). It is believed that the experience of living in an intercultural environment is more valuable than the learning process itself (Chalid, 2014). Learning from cross-cultural experiences and reflecting on one's own culture in the midst of those experiences is what develops cultural self-awareness and intercultural sensitivity.

2.3 Theoretical framework: Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

2.3.1 Overview of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

In this study, the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS for short) was adopted as the theoretical framework for exploring students' experience in an intercultural encounter. DMIS which based on the theory of personal construct, was proposed by Bennett in 1986 to explain people's experiences in intercultural environments. It is a model of the development of cognitive structure. The basic assumption of DMIS is that the more complex the cultural differences an individual experiences, the faster his/her intercultural-related abilities will improve (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). The model categorizes individuals' attitudes toward cultural differences in cross-cultural contexts into two stages and six orientations.

Each stage and orientation represent a specific worldview (Table 1). The first stage is ethnocentrism, in which the individual centers on his or her own experience and believes that his or her own culture is unique. At its most extreme, this involves rejecting cultural differences and isolating oneself from other cultures; it progresses to defensiveness, experiencing slight cultural differences but seeing them as threatening; and then to outwardly recognizing cultural differences but still inwardly despising them. The second stage is ethnorelativism, in which the individual's worldview shifts considerably as he or she begins to experience and reflect on his or her own culture in the context of other cultures. This stage develops as a gradual beginning of acceptance and appreciation of cultural differences; then empathy and resonance with other cultures; and finally the integration of one's own culture with other cultures, resulting in a sense of two or more cultural identities.

Table 1: Descriptions of the six orientations of DMIS

	Stage	Key concepts
Ethnocentrism	Denial of cultural difference	The experience of one's own culture is the only authentic one, avoiding consideration of other culture, showing no interest in cultural differences.
	Defense against cultural difference	People perceive their own culture as superior, and begin to experience uncomplicated cultural differences, but see them as a threat.
	Minimization of cultural Difference	One experiences some cultural differences and no longer regards them as a threat, but only accepts cultures that are similar to one's own and fails to see the differences.
Ethnorelativism	Acceptance of cultural Difference	One can distinguish cultural differences and starts to accept and appreciate them.
	Adaptation to cultural difference	One begins to shift one's perspective within the worldviews of other cultures and develops empathy and resonance towards other cultures as a basis for biculturalism and multiculturalism.
	Integration of cultural difference into identity	Personal self-experience extends to different cultural worldviews. Internalizing two or more cultural worldviews and interpreting one's cultural identity in two or more cultural margins

Source: Revised from Bennett & Bennett (2004); Hammer et al. (2003)

2.3.2 Application of DMIS

After the DMIS was proposed, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI for short) was constructed to

measure the six orientations towards cultural differences. Both the DMIS and the IDI have been widely applied in a variety of intercultural situations, including short-term study abroad programs for students and teachers, overseas internship programs, and so on. Researchers use the DMIS and the IDI to examine or measure the intercultural competence of students and teachers before and after the implementation of these programs. According to the results, they evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in enhancing intercultural competence and further put forward suggestions for optimizing the programs.

Pedersen (2010) conducted an action research study using the IDI to assess the effectiveness of intercultural instruction in a year-long study abroad program by administering pre-tests and post-tests to students in three groups. Results indicated that to promote students' intercultural competence, it is not enough to place students in a foreign environment. Conscious intercultural education and tutoring are required. Cushner & Chang (2015) used the IDI to measure the impact of students' 8-15 weeks of internship teaching experience abroad on their intercultural competence. The measurements were generally positive but not statistically significant. The researchers suggested that exposure to a new culture alone is not sufficient to develop intercultural competence, but rather students need to be guided to understand the importance of intercultural competence and to reflect and debrief on a regular basis.

Hou, Chan, Lin, and Hu (2020) explored how Taiwanese students developed intercultural awareness, interdisciplinary communication skills, etc. during their short-term study in the United States. The results showed that the students were in the defensive and minimization stages according to the DMIS theory before their departure. After the program ended, the students realized that they were able to appreciate cultural differences and were in the acceptance stage, indicating that the students' intercultural competence had improved, but they did not immerse themselves in American society and culture.

It is clear from the literature that simply placing students or faculty in a new cultural environment is not sufficient to enhance their intercultural competence, and that active intervention, feedback, and guidance are needed both before and during the program. In addition, DMIS and IDI have been used in short-term programs, while research on degree programs has been very limited, perhaps due to the fact that degree programs have a large time span that does not allow for pre-testing and post-testing.

3. Methods

This study is a qualitative study, and the data were obtained in two ways: firstly, various documents and information, which were selected, including policy documents, annual summaries, self-assessment reports, briefs, publications, and school websites of the two universities, etc.; and secondly, in-depth interviews, which were conducted using the semi-structured interview method, and the talk outline was prepared according to the content of the study. In this study,

students of two Chinese-foreign cooperative universities, University A and University B, were selected as the study cases. The two universities are well-developed and have a good reputation and prestige in China. A total of 21 students

from the two universities were interviewed for this study. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, all the interviewees are replaced by codes, "AS" for students of University A; "BS" for students of University B (Table 2).

Table 2: Participants' codes

Coding	College	Grade
AS1	College of Humanities and Social Sciences	third year
AS2	College of Science and Technology	third year
AS3	College of Business	third year
AS4	College of Business	third year
AS5	College of Business	third year
AS6	College of Humanities and Social Sciences	third year
AS7	College of Science and Technology	first year
AS8	College of Science and Technology	third year
AS9	College of Humanities and Social Sciences	first year
AS10	College of Business	first year
AS11	College of Design	fourth year
BS1	College of Design	second year
BS2	College of Design	second year
BS3	College of Design	third year
BS4	College of Humanities and Social Sciences	second year
BS5	College of Science	second year
BS6	College of Intelligent Engineering	first year
BS7	College of Intelligent Engineering	first year
BS8	College of Science	second year
BS9	College of Business	second year
BS10	College of Science	second year

4. Result

4.1 The participants expressed their opinions on the courses from aspects such as the way the courses are carried out, the class hours, and the degree of difficulty

Students start their formal major studies from the sophomore year. The courses are mainly delivered through lectures, seminars, or tutorials. Lectures are given to large classes with a large number of participants, and it is mainly the one-way output from the teachers. The interviewees didn't have any particularly special experiences in lecture classes. Seminars or tutorial classes are small-class teaching, and the form is more flexible than that of lecture classes. Most of the interviewees said that the seminar class has a more flexible form and a more lively atmosphere, and they can gain a greater sense of participation from it. Students complete common learning tasks through group cooperation, which can improve their teamwork ability. For example, AS6 mentioned that the teacher requires students to give full play to everyone's advantages through group cooperation, and then they can be aware of their own biases.

In terms of class hours, the two Sino-foreign cooperative universities have fewer class hours than other universities in China. Most of the participants indicated that this gave them ample time for self-determination. AS2 said that there is no external force to urge students to attend classes, and that students need to have good self-management skills to organize their study plans. BS10 said that such an arrangement is an advantage for excellent students, as they

can have more independent time for exploration. However, for students lacking self-management ability, it is a disadvantage, as they are unable to arrange their after-class time reasonably. BS8 believed that students need to be proactive and motivated to arrange their spare time reasonably. BS9, on the other hand, thought that both courses and extracurricular activities are equally important, and the ample spare time ensures more independent exploration.

This kind of relaxed schedule is not necessarily a kind of relaxation, but the inner meaning of it should be to encourage students to explore more about what they want to do. In my program, internships or research experiences are probably as important as the curriculum, and then also cultural exploration and understanding are also important. So I've always been in favor of the ease of scheduling and the flexibility (BS9).

In terms of difficulty, some participants mentioned that compared to other universities in China, they only entered their major field of study in their sophomore year, and that the pace of the course was faster and the class time was less, so they had a feeling that they could not learn anything more than they wanted to. Some participants also said that the courses were not so difficult that the basic knowledge they absorbed in the classroom was not enough to support their advanced studies and they needed to supplement their studies.

We have more free time than students at other universities in China, not having their schedules as filled as theirs. However, those students tend to learn more in class than we do (AS8).

4.2 The diversification of teachers' backgrounds enables students to experience different teaching styles and methods

The teachers of the two universities come from all over the world and have diverse teaching styles. The students have different experiences in the classrooms of teachers from different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. AS7 mentioned that teachers worry about students' reception difficulties and assist teaching through rich body language, as well as teachers are good at observing students' expressions in the classroom to understand their doubts and offer help;. AS6 thought that the teacher's teaching not only had key points and emphases but also involved the teacher's research interests. AS6 also provided multiple examples to describe the teacher's comprehensive and detailed interpretation of the teaching content. She regarded this kind of interpretation by the teacher as "very precious", and the gains from the course made her feel that "she was more like a student of humanities and social sciences". Here is one of the examples:

There is a teacher who studied medieval history. He would talk about medieval history from a more whole point of view, talking about why believers went on pilgrimage at that time, what the spirit was like during the pilgrimage, and what effect it had on their spirit. He talks about the cathedral, about the presence of God in the form of light, and what the thin leather windows looked like. Talking about why you should go and look at the remains, what effect it has on you, that is, it will talk about the development of this medieval spiritual world. I think this teacher's kind of interpretation is invaluable because there's no way elsewhere that you're going to be able to get into this so carefully (AS6).

Some participants also mentioned the difference between Chinese and foreign teachers' teaching styles. AS5 felt the difference between the teaching styles of Chinese and foreign teachers, saying that Chinese teachers use traditional teaching style, focusing on organizing the knowledge and not jumping out of the content, while foreign teachers do not limit themselves to the content but focus on guiding students to think and explore further. BS2 also mentioned that foreign teachers are good at encouraging students and are willing to discuss simple questions with them, while Chinese teachers are more focused on their teaching content.

4.3 Most of the participants believe that the assessment of learning outcomes is rigorous and fair

University A evaluates students' learning outcomes through exams and course work, including essays, time writing,

group work, oral presentations, and tests. The specific assessment methods include short essays, time writing, group work, oral presentations, and tests. The assessment methods and percentages for a course are specified in the lesson plan and cannot be changed by the teacher. At the beginning of the course, the teacher will announce to the students the specific methods and percentages of assessment, detailed evaluation criteria, and the deadline for the submission of the results, and the students will organize their learning process according to this information. Evaluations are carried out throughout the course of study to diagnose students' stage-by-stage learning difficulties and to keep them in a state of continuous learning (AS4, AS8, AS7).

AS8 stated that in order to complete the course work, students must engage in self-directed learning beyond the classroom, and the assessment can 'ensure that learning process is not slackened'. AS7 believed that the usual tests could objectively reflect their stage-by-stage learning outcomes; and AS6's view was that, no matter which type of assessment was used, the assessment was designed to cultivate the students' skills in academics, communication, and cooperation, in order to help them develop in their future professional careers.

Student learning outcomes are measured by a combination of different methods and percentages in University B. These include exams, teamwork, presentations, attendance, etc. The grading criteria and deadlines for submission of assignments are published in the course handbook.

The participant BS1, a student from the College of Design, mentioned a design course. The teacher would examine students' works in each teaching unit and give timely feedback. Students are required to submit their course assignments every week and then present their design concepts in class. The teacher will give suggestions, and students will continuously improve their works according to these suggestions. After the course ends, the teacher will grade the final works presented by students, and this score is the final grade of this course. BS11 stated that the final grade is determined by two course assignments, which keeps her a state of continuous learning.

Most of the participants indicated that the assessment of the course is very strict. One of the participants, BS8, stated that 'no teacher will grade you out of sympathy'. BS3 and AS6 also stated that usual assignments as well as exams need to comply with academic ethics or else they will be judged as academic misconduct. Teachers have zero tolerance for academic misconduct, and grades may be marked as zero even if there is a very low rate of similarity. When University A and University B evaluate student learning outcomes by examination, there is an internal and external moderation of examination papers, and student grades are only published after internal moderation in order to ensure that student grades are fair.

4.4 Not many opportunities for cross-cultural interactions

Most of the participants indicated that there were few cross - cultural interactions, and they basically had no experience of cultural conflicts. Their interactions with teachers mainly focused on academic discussions, and they generally avoided private conversations. As AS7 stated, "During the class, students and teachers must maintain a certain distance." Students can have academic discussions with teachers during office hours. In addition, both universities provide personal tutors for students, requiring personal tutors to have a certain number of meetings with students at least once a semester. Students can also interact with teachers through extracurricular activities organized by the school and departments. The interviewees said that they had few opportunities to contact foreign classmates. They only had discussions and cooperation with foreign classmates in class, and there was basically no communication outside of class (BS1).

In addition, participants mentioned the phenomenon of 'Chineseization' and 'embracing' of foreign teachers and students. When interacting with local students, they would use Chinese language or behave as a Chinese, integrating into the Chinese culture. Some participants said that expatriate students would 'socialize in groups' and were less keen to integrate into Chinese students.

I met a student from Japan who speaks Chinese quite well. Later, I met a student from South Korea. At first, I spoke English with him, and our communication was only limited to necessary interactions in class. I didn't take the initiative to approach him either. But later, he could also speak Chinese. So I'm very curious about why he learned it so quickly (AS1).

Generally speaking, there aren't many foreigners in the clubs. It seems that foreign students don't really want to integrate into Chinese students (BS3).

5. Discussion

5.1 Path of students' intercultural sensitivity development

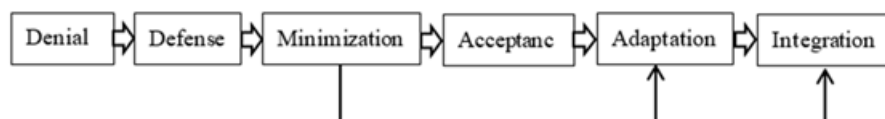


Figure 1: Path of students' intercultural sensitivity development

5.2 How to build a supportive intercultural learning environment?

Teaching within a framework of intercultural dialogues, building a supportive learning environment, trying to keep the lessons and assessments close to the students, and guiding students' thinking, which are ways to develop students' intercultural competence (Wang, 2016). Building a

This study adopts DMIS as a framework to evaluate the cross - cultural learning experiences of the participants from two Sino-foreign cooperative universities and gives an overall description of students' experiences. This study gives an overall description of students' experiences based on qualitative data. In the initial stage of enrollment, the participants were in the "minimization" stage. If the students in the "denial" or "defense" stages, they were less likely to choose to study at Sino - foreign cooperative universities. Therefore, it can be inferred that the students had the intention of cross - cultural development at the enrollment stage (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006), but had not yet experienced cultural differences. According to the DMIS model, this is the "minimization" stage.

Then they begin to understand the academic culture from the programs, the teaching methods and styles of teachers, and the standards and requirements of assessment. As their understanding and experience deepens, participants form their own views and opinions about the academic culture of the school, begin to accept cultural differences, express positive attitudes toward some cultural differences, and are willing to interact with teachers and classmates from different cultures, but the opportunities for such non-academic cross-cultural exchanges are limited. Based on this, respondents entered the 'adaptation' stage of DMIS.

Since the participants' understanding of different cultures is mainly through their majors, coupled with the lack of non-academic cross-cultural communication, most of the participants have not yet been able to form an alternative cultural worldview. However, some participants from humanities and social sciences majors have more opportunities to come into contact with multiculturalism in their course of study, and are able to understand their own cultures from different perspectives, and criticize and reflect on their own cultures as well as those of others. Over time, they gradually integrate their own culture with other cultures, which is in line with the "integration" stage of DMIS (Figure 1).

supportive intercultural learning environment is more critical. The result of this study shows that the way courses are delivered affects the development of students' cross - cultural competence. Lectures, seminars, and tutorials are common course formats. Among them, seminars and tutorials are more popular among students due to their small - group interaction format. This interaction format provides students with more opportunities for communication and

cooperation, helping them better understand and experience different cultures. It is suggested A multi - cultural perspective can be adopted to existing courses to help students understand cultural differences, and practical sessions in the courses can be increased to allow students to enhance their intercultural competence in practice.

The diversification of teachers' backgrounds also influences the development of students' cross - cultural competence. The result has found that there are differences in the teaching styles and methods between Chinese and foreign teachers, and these differences help students understand cultural differences from multiple perspectives. For example, foreign teachers' pay more attention to guiding students to think and explore, while Chinese teachers focus more on the systematic imparting of knowledge. Such a diverse teaching approach can provide students with a richer learning experience. It is advisable to promote communication and cooperation between Chinese and foreign teachers, and encourage them to jointly design courses and teaching activities, so as to better integrate the teaching advantages of teachers from different cultural backgrounds.

The two universities mainly promote students' intercultural competence through systematic curricula and activities, which are internationalization at home, and their shortcoming is the lack of opportunities for students to contact and interact with people from different cultures. The development of intercultural competence is a vertical and continuous process that deepens over time (Fantini, 2009). Therefore, maintaining a certain percentage of foreign teachers and students and creating more platforms for cross-cultural interactions will lead to a more positive experience of cross-cultural learning for local students.

6. Conclusion

In an increasingly interconnected world, intercultural competence is indispensable for modern learners. This study, based on DMIS, captures how students at Sino-foreign cooperative universities evolve in their cultural sensitivity—from minimization to adaptation and, in some cases, integration. While teaching styles and course formats offer fertile ground for intercultural learning, the limited social interaction with peers from different backgrounds suggests a gap in holistic development. Expanding non-academic intercultural experiences could enrich student outcomes in these settings.

Funding Project

2021 Educational Science Planning Project (Higher Education Special Program), titled 'Research on the Cross-Cultural Education Model of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities in the Greater Bay Area' (Project Number: 2021GXJK106)

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