

Institutional Constraints and the Implementation Gap in Multicultural Education: A Conceptual Analysis of Chinese Higher Education Internationalisation

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Abstract

Globalisation and higher education internationalisation have significantly reshaped university governance and educational practices worldwide. In China, universities have rapidly expanded international cooperation programmes, transnational curriculum systems, and global academic partnerships under conditions of digital transformation and educational modernisation. However, despite the continuous expansion of higher education internationalisation, multicultural education outcomes remain uneven across institutions. Significant disparities persist in institutional governance capacity, curriculum implementation, intercultural interaction, and organisational adaptability. Existing studies primarily focus on curriculum reform and internationalisation strategies while paying insufficient attention to the structural mechanisms shaping implementation outcomes. This paper therefore develops an integrated analytical framework to examine how institutional constraints, digital transformation, global transformation, and international political environments jointly contribute to the implementation gap in multicultural education within Chinese higher education. Using a conceptual and comparative analytical approach, the study analyses representative institutional models, including elite transnational universities and resource-constrained local universities. The paper argues that multicultural education outcomes are mediated by institutional governance capacity and implementation effectiveness rather than by internationalisation expansion alone. The study contributes to the literature by integrating implementation theory, governance analysis, and higher education internationalisation into a unified conceptual framework.

Keywords: *Chinese Universities, Digital Transformation, Higher Education Internationalisation, Implementation Gap, Institutional Constraints, Multicultural Education*

Introduction

Globalisation and higher education internationalisation have significantly reshaped university governance, academic collaboration, and educational practices worldwide (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Marginson, 2023). Universities increasingly participate in transnational academic cooperation, international curriculum development, and global educational exchange as part of broader processes of educational modernisation and global integration. In China, higher education internationalisation has accelerated rapidly through the expansion of international cooperation programmes, Sino-foreign

educational partnerships, overseas academic collaboration, and English-medium instruction systems (Yang, 2022).

The rapid expansion of higher education internationalisation has also transformed the governance structure and educational objectives of universities. Chinese universities increasingly seek to improve global competitiveness, academic reputation, and international influence through global partnerships and international curriculum systems. In recent years, internationalisation has become closely connected with broader national strategies related to educational modernisation, digital transformation, and global talent development. As a result, universities are expected not only to strengthen international academic cooperation, but also to cultivate intercultural understanding and multicultural competencies among students.

At the same time, digital transformation has increasingly influenced university governance structures, curriculum delivery, and educational management systems (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). The growing integration of digital platforms, online learning systems, and AI-supported educational technologies has expanded opportunities for international academic interaction and institutional coordination. Digital learning environments, virtual exchange programmes, and online collaborative teaching models have become increasingly important components of higher education internationalisation, particularly following the acceleration of global digitalisation in the post-pandemic period.

However, recent studies suggest that digital transformation and higher education internationalisation remain uneven across institutions due to differences in governance capacity, technological infrastructure, organisational adaptability, and resource allocation (Selwyn, 2022). Elite universities generally possess stronger technological resources, more advanced digital governance systems, and greater access to international educational networks. In contrast, many local and resource-constrained universities continue to experience challenges in technological implementation, faculty internationalisation, and intercultural learning support. These institutional disparities increasingly affect the implementation effectiveness of multicultural education within higher education systems.

Within this broader context, multicultural education has become an important component of higher education internationalisation. Multicultural education emphasises intercultural understanding, educational equity, cultural inclusiveness, and the development of global competencies among students (Banks, 2021; Leask, 2022). Universities are increasingly expected to create learning environments that support intercultural interaction and multicultural engagement in response to growing educational diversity and international academic integration.

Despite the continuous expansion of internationalisation policies and international education programmes, multicultural education outcomes remain uneven across Chinese universities. Existing research indicates that intercultural interaction, curriculum implementation, and multicultural learning experiences vary significantly across institutions (de Wit, 2020). In some universities, multicultural education is deeply integrated into curriculum design, student services, and institutional governance systems. In other institutions, however, multicultural education remains

limited to symbolic internationalisation policies without substantial intercultural learning transformation.

Existing studies have primarily focused on curriculum reform, intercultural competence development, and internationalisation strategies while paying comparatively limited attention to the structural mechanisms shaping implementation outcomes. In particular, insufficient research has examined how institutional constraints, digital transformation, global transformation, and international political environments jointly contribute to the implementation gap in multicultural education within Chinese higher education. The relationship between governance capacity and implementation effectiveness therefore remains insufficiently explored within existing literature.

Therefore, this study aims to develop a conceptual analytical framework to examine how multiple structural factors influence multicultural education implementation under conditions of higher education internationalisation and digital transformation. The study argues that multicultural education outcomes are shaped not only by internationalisation expansion itself, but also by institutional governance capacity, implementation effectiveness, and organisational adaptability. By integrating implementation theory, governance analysis, and higher education internationalisation studies, this paper seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the structural factors influencing multicultural education implementation in Chinese universities.

Review of Related Literature

The internationalisation of Chinese higher education has expanded through global partnerships, student mobility, English-medium programmes, research collaboration, and digital learning. However, the literature suggests that internationalisation does not automatically produce effective multicultural education. A major concern is the implementation gap between institutional policy and actual classroom or campus practice.

Multicultural education is grounded in equity, inclusion, cultural recognition, and institutional transformation. Banks (2021) argues that multicultural education requires more than the presence of diverse students; it demands curriculum reform, inclusive pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and an empowering institutional culture. Similarly, Gay (2020) emphasizes culturally responsive teaching, where students' cultural backgrounds are treated as resources for learning. These ideas are highly relevant to Chinese universities as they engage with increasingly diverse student populations and global academic expectations.

Internationalisation is also a complex and contested concept. Knight (2021) explains that it includes international, intercultural, and global dimensions in higher education. De Wit (2020) and de Wit and Altbach (2021) caution that internationalisation should not be reduced to rankings, mobility statistics, or market-driven goals. Instead, it should be ethical, qualitative, and inclusive. In China, however, internationalisation is often linked to competitiveness, institutional prestige, and national development goals, which may limit attention to multicultural learning (Yang, 2022).

Curriculum is a key area where the implementation gap becomes visible. Leask (2022) argues that internationalising the curriculum requires integrating intercultural and global perspectives into learning outcomes, content, pedagogy, and assessment. Yet Chinese higher education institutions may face constraints such as rigid curricula, language barriers, limited faculty training, and uneven institutional resources.

Policy implementation theory further explains this gap. Pressman and Wildavsky (2020) show that policies often fail when goals are unclear, coordination is weak, and local capacity is insufficient. This applies to multicultural education when universities adopt internationalisation strategies without aligning governance, teaching practices, student support, and faculty development. Digital transformation also affects internationalisation. OECD (2023), Selwyn (2022), and UNESCO (2024) note that technology can expand global learning but may reproduce inequalities if not guided by inclusion. Castells' (2021) network society perspective further shows that universities participate unequally in global knowledge networks.

Overall, the literature indicates that the implementation gap in multicultural education within Chinese higher education internationalisation results from institutional constraints, limited pedagogical readiness, policy-practice mismatch, and uneven digital and global capacities.

Objectives

The objectives of this article are to examine institutional constraints that affect the implementation of multicultural education within the internationalisation of Chinese higher education and to analyse governance capacity in shaping the effectiveness of related policies. It seeks to identify gaps between internationalisation policy objectives and actual practices, while also exploring curriculum design as a driver of intercultural learning and engagement among students. Another key objective is to assess faculty preparedness in supporting culturally responsive teaching within internationalised settings.

In addition, the study aims to investigate digital transformation and its influence on multicultural education implementation, while analysing the impact of unequal technological infrastructure and institutional resources on internationalisation outcomes. It also seeks to understand global academic networks and international cooperation as factors shaping multicultural practices. Ultimately, the article intends to develop a conceptual framework linking institutional constraints, implementation gaps, and educational outcomes, and to provide theoretical insights for improving inclusive, ethical, and effective multicultural education within the broader context of Chinese higher education internationalisation.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a conceptual analytical approach because multicultural education implementation within higher education internationalisation involves complex institutional, technological, political, and governance-related dimensions. Existing studies suggest that internationalisation policies alone cannot fully explain differences in multicultural education outcomes across universities (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Instead, implementation effectiveness is often influenced by broader institutional structures, governance capacity, resource allocation, and organisational adaptability.

As higher education systems become increasingly interconnected through globalisation and digital transformation, universities are required to respond simultaneously to international academic competition, technological change, and intercultural educational demands.

Implementation theory provides an important analytical foundation for this study. Pressman and Wildavsky (2020) argue that policy implementation outcomes frequently diverge from policy intentions due to administrative fragmentation, coordination difficulties, and institutional complexity. In higher education contexts, universities operate under different governance environments, financial conditions, organisational cultures, and institutional capacities, which significantly influence policy implementation effectiveness. Consequently, similar internationalisation policies may produce substantially different multicultural education outcomes across institutions. The study is therefore structured around an IV–MV–DV analytical framework to explain how multiple structural factors jointly influence multicultural education implementation in Chinese universities. The independent variables (IVs) include institutional constraints, digital transformation, global transformation, and international political environments. These variables increasingly shape university governance systems, curriculum coordination, resource allocation, digital capability, and organisational decision-making processes within higher education internationalisation.

Institutional constraints refer to differences in governance structures, administrative coordination, financial resources, faculty internationalisation, and organisational flexibility across universities. Existing research indicates that universities with stronger governance capacity and more stable internationalisation systems are generally better positioned to implement multicultural education effectively (Marginson, 2023). In contrast, resource-constrained universities may experience limitations in intercultural curriculum implementation, international student support, and multicultural learning coordination. Digital transformation is included as an independent variable because digital governance increasingly influences educational administration, online learning systems, intercultural communication, and international academic collaboration (OECD, 2023). Universities with stronger technological infrastructure and digital governance systems are more capable of supporting virtual international learning environments, AI-supported educational management, and online intercultural interaction. However, uneven digital capability across institutions may further intensify educational inequality and implementation disparities.

Global transformation and international political environments are also incorporated into the framework because higher education internationalisation increasingly operates within unstable global conditions. Changes in geopolitical relations, international educational governance, global mobility patterns, and transnational academic cooperation significantly affect university internationalisation strategies and programme sustainability (UNESCO, 2024). These external structural conditions influence not only policy implementation processes, but also institutional adaptability and governance effectiveness. The mediating variable (MV) within the framework is the implementation gap, which refers to the divergence between policy objectives and actual institutional practice. The study argues that institutional conditions do not directly determine multicultural education outcomes. Instead, implementation

effectiveness functions as a central mediating mechanism connecting governance structures and educational performance. Universities with stronger governance capacity, more stable internationalisation systems, and greater organisational flexibility are generally better positioned to translate policy objectives into effective multicultural educational practice.

The dependent variable (DV) is multicultural education outcomes, including curriculum implementation effectiveness, intercultural learning interaction, educational inclusiveness, student global competency development, and the sustainability of multicultural educational practices. The framework therefore explains how institutional conditions and governance structures influence multicultural education implementation outcomes through the mediating process of implementation effectiveness. The conceptual framework also reflects the growing influence of digital governance within higher education internationalisation. Universities increasingly rely on online learning platforms, AI-supported educational technologies, digital administrative systems, and virtual international collaboration mechanisms to coordinate teaching and academic management (Selwyn, 2022). Digital transformation therefore functions not only as a technological process, but also as a governance mechanism influencing implementation capacity, organisational coordination, and institutional adaptability.

Overall, the conceptual framework developed in this study provides an integrated perspective for understanding how governance conditions, institutional capacity, digital transformation, and implementation processes jointly shape multicultural education outcomes within Chinese higher education internationalisation.

Comparative Analytical Approach

Expanded Addition for 2.2 Comparative Analytical Approach

This study further employs a comparative analytical approach to examine differences between highly internationalised universities and resource-constrained institutions in terms of governance structure, digital capability, curriculum implementation, and intercultural learning support (Leask, 2022; Selwyn, 2022). Comparative analysis is appropriate because Chinese universities demonstrate substantial variation in internationalisation intensity, governance systems, financial resources, organisational adaptability, and access to global educational networks.

Highly internationalised universities often possess stronger international partnerships, more advanced digital governance systems, and greater access to global educational resources. These institutions are generally better positioned to integrate multicultural education into curriculum systems, intercultural activities, international student services, and institutional governance structures. In many cases, multicultural education is incorporated into broader university internationalisation strategies through bilingual curriculum delivery, intercultural training programmes, international faculty recruitment, and overseas academic cooperation initiatives.

By comparison, many local and resource-constrained universities continue to face limitations in technological infrastructure, faculty internationalisation, intercultural programme coordination, and institutional governance capacity. Although these universities may formally adopt internationalisation policies, practical implementation often remains constrained by financial limitations, administrative fragmentation,

uneven resource allocation, and insufficient organisational flexibility. As a result, multicultural education implementation may remain symbolic or policy-oriented rather than deeply integrated into curriculum and student learning experiences.

The comparative analytical approach therefore enables the study to examine how governance differences influence multicultural education outcomes under conditions of rapid global transformation. Existing research suggests that governance capacity significantly affects policy coordination, implementation efficiency, and institutional adaptability within higher education systems (Marginson, 2023). Universities with stronger organisational coordination and international governance structures are generally more capable of translating internationalisation policies into effective multicultural educational practices.

In addition, comparative analysis allows the study to explore the relationship between digital transformation and institutional inequality. Universities increasingly rely on digital learning platforms, AI-supported governance systems, virtual international classrooms, and online academic collaboration mechanisms to support internationalisation processes. However, uneven digital capability across institutions may further intensify disparities in multicultural educational access and implementation effectiveness. Universities with stronger technological resources are more capable of facilitating intercultural communication, international collaboration, and flexible learning environments, whereas less-resourced institutions may struggle to maintain sustainable digital internationalisation systems.

The comparative approach also helps explain why similar national internationalisation policies may produce substantially different institutional outcomes. Although universities operate under the same national higher education policy framework, institutional implementation processes differ significantly due to variations in governance structures, leadership capacity, organisational culture, and institutional priorities. Consequently, multicultural education implementation should be understood not only as a policy issue, but also as an institutional governance issue shaped by organisational conditions and implementation capability.

Furthermore, international political environments and global uncertainty increasingly affect university internationalisation strategies and institutional decision-making processes. Changes in geopolitical relations, international mobility patterns, and global academic cooperation structures continue to influence student exchange, transnational partnerships, and international programme sustainability (UNESCO, 2024). Universities therefore demonstrate different levels of institutional resilience and adaptability when responding to global educational transformation and international political change.

Overall, the comparative analytical approach adopted in this study provides a broader institutional perspective for understanding how governance structures, resource allocation, digital capability, and organisational adaptability jointly influence multicultural education implementation outcomes across Chinese universities.

Analysis

The article explores the intersection of educational practices, technology integration, and learner engagement, highlighting how modern pedagogical strategies influence

student outcomes. It emphasizes the critical role of innovative instructional methods and digital tools in enhancing knowledge acquisition and promoting active participation. The findings suggest that a thoughtful combination of traditional and technology-driven teaching approaches leads to more effective learning experiences, fostering higher levels of comprehension and retention among students. Notably, the study underscores the importance of adaptability and responsiveness in instructional design, aligning content delivery with learners' cognitive needs and contextual realities. Furthermore, the research identifies a direct correlation between teacher facilitation, digital literacy, and student motivation. By integrating interactive platforms, simulations, and collaborative learning environments, educators can bridge gaps in engagement and foster a culture of continuous learning. The analysis reveals that technology is not merely a supplementary tool but a transformative element capable of reshaping classroom dynamics and enhancing educational equity. The role of feedback, assessment, and personalized learning is also highlighted as crucial in monitoring student progress and informing pedagogical adjustments, thereby ensuring that learning objectives are consistently met.

Lastly, the study situates these findings within broader educational frameworks, suggesting that policy, infrastructure, and teacher training are pivotal to sustaining the impact of innovative practices. Challenges such as resource limitations, varying levels of digital competency, and resistance to change are acknowledged, yet the article demonstrates that strategic planning, professional development, and inclusive practices can mitigate these obstacles. Overall, the analysis confirms that a holistic approach combining pedagogical innovation, technology integration, and responsive educational policies can significantly enhance learning outcomes and prepare students for future academic and professional demands.

Findings and Discussion

Higher Education Internationalisation and Institutional Differences

Higher education internationalisation has expanded significantly across Chinese universities through international cooperation programmes, transnational education partnerships, overseas academic exchange, and English-medium instruction systems (Yang, 2022; Marginson, 2023). However, the implementation effectiveness of multicultural education remains uneven across institutions due to differences in governance capacity, institutional resources, and organisational adaptability. The rapid expansion of higher education internationalisation has reshaped curriculum structures, university governance systems, student mobility patterns, and institutional development strategies within Chinese higher education. Universities increasingly seek to improve international competitiveness and global academic visibility through overseas partnerships, international curriculum integration, and cross-border educational cooperation. Internationalisation is therefore no longer limited to student exchange programmes, but has become closely connected with institutional governance transformation and global educational participation.

Elite transnational universities and highly internationalised institutions generally possess stronger global academic networks, more stable governance structures, and greater access to international educational resources. These universities are often better positioned to implement international curriculum systems, support intercultural learning environments, and coordinate multicultural educational practices. Many highly internationalised universities actively integrate multicultural education into

institutional governance strategies, student development programmes, and international academic collaboration initiatives. For example, some transnational universities operating in China adopt bilingual curriculum systems, globally oriented teaching models, and intercultural engagement programmes designed to strengthen students' international competencies and multicultural communication abilities. International faculty recruitment, overseas academic partnerships, and international research collaboration further contribute to the development of multicultural educational environments within these institutions. In contrast, resource-constrained universities frequently encounter challenges in curriculum coordination, faculty internationalisation, digital infrastructure, and multicultural learning support (de Wit, 2020; Leask, 2022). Although many universities formally adopt higher education internationalisation policies, practical implementation may remain limited due to insufficient financial resources, uneven organisational coordination, and restricted access to global academic networks. Institutional disparities also influence students' intercultural learning experiences. Students studying in highly internationalised universities are generally more likely to access intercultural interaction opportunities, international academic exchange activities, bilingual learning environments, and globally integrated curriculum systems. By comparison, students in less internationalised institutions may experience fewer opportunities for intercultural engagement and multicultural learning participation.

Existing studies further suggest that internationalisation expansion does not automatically produce effective multicultural education outcomes because intercultural interaction and multicultural engagement often remain limited across institutions (Banks, 2021). In some cases, universities prioritise international rankings, overseas partnerships, and symbolic internationalisation indicators without fully integrating multicultural educational practices into daily teaching and student learning experiences. Consequently, structural internationalisation does not necessarily guarantee meaningful multicultural educational transformation. Furthermore, differences in institutional leadership and governance coordination significantly influence implementation effectiveness. Universities with stronger governance capacity are generally more capable of coordinating curriculum reform, international faculty development, intercultural student support, and digital educational management. In contrast, fragmented administrative structures and weak organisational coordination may reduce the effectiveness of multicultural education implementation despite formal internationalisation policies.

The differences between university types can be further illustrated through comparative institutional characteristics presented in Table 1. These institutional inequalities demonstrate that multicultural education implementation is closely associated with governance capacity, resource allocation, organisational adaptability, and internationalisation intensity within higher education systems.

Table 1. Comparative Institutional Characteristics

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Dimension	Highly Internationalised Universities	Resource-Constrained Universities
Governance Capacity	Strong international governance systems	Limited coordination capacity
Digital Infrastructure	Advanced digital and AI-supported systems	Uneven digital capability
Curriculum Implementation	Stable international curriculum integration	Fragmented curriculum coordination
Faculty Internationalisation	Higher level of international academic engagement	Limited international faculty exposure
Multicultural Learning Support	Strong intercultural learning environment	Inconsistent multicultural support

Highly Internationalised Universities

Highly internationalised universities represent an important institutional model within Chinese higher education internationalisation. These universities generally possess stronger international governance systems, greater access to global academic resources, and more advanced intercultural educational environments. In recent years, transnational universities and Sino-foreign cooperative institutions such as New York University Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, and Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University have increasingly become representative examples of internationalised higher education development in China. These universities often adopt bilingual or English-medium curriculum systems and emphasise intercultural learning interaction within teaching and campus governance structures. International faculty recruitment, overseas academic cooperation, globally integrated curriculum design, and multicultural student environments are commonly incorporated into institutional internationalisation strategies. As a result, students within these universities are generally exposed to stronger intercultural communication opportunities and more internationally oriented learning environments.

Highly internationalised universities also demonstrate stronger organisational adaptability and governance coordination capacity. Their institutional structures are often designed to support flexible curriculum management, international academic collaboration, and digital educational integration. In many cases, universities rely on online learning systems, AI-supported educational technologies, and virtual international collaboration platforms to facilitate transnational academic interaction and multicultural educational participation. Furthermore, these universities frequently possess more stable financial resources and stronger international academic networks, enabling them to sustain long-term internationalisation initiatives and multicultural educational programmes. International student support services, intercultural activities, overseas exchange opportunities, and globally oriented academic training are often more systematically integrated into university governance systems. Consequently, multicultural education implementation within these institutions is generally more comprehensive and institutionally coordinated.

However, existing studies suggest that even highly internationalised universities may still encounter challenges in achieving meaningful multicultural integration (Banks, 2021). Internationalisation does not automatically guarantee deep intercultural engagement among students. In some cases, multicultural interaction remains limited to formal institutional activities rather than substantial intercultural learning transformation. Differences in language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and student participation may continue to affect multicultural educational outcomes despite advanced internationalisation structures.

Resource-Constrained Universities

In contrast, many local and resource-constrained universities continue to face substantial limitations in implementing multicultural education effectively. Although these institutions increasingly adopt higher education internationalisation policies, implementation capacity often remains uneven due to financial constraints, administrative fragmentation, and limited access to international academic networks. Many local universities continue to prioritise administrative internationalisation indicators, such as formal cooperation agreements and international programme expansion, without sufficient institutional capacity to support long-term multicultural educational development. Limited funding, insufficient technological infrastructure, and uneven faculty internationalisation may reduce universities' ability to establish sustainable intercultural learning environments.

Faculty internationalisation also remains uneven across institutions. Universities with limited access to international academic resources may experience difficulties in recruiting internationally experienced faculty members or providing intercultural professional development opportunities for teaching staff. Consequently, multicultural educational practices may remain insufficiently integrated into curriculum implementation and classroom interaction. Digital inequality further contributes to institutional disparities. Some universities lack advanced online learning systems, digital governance mechanisms, and virtual international collaboration platforms necessary for supporting international academic interaction and intercultural communication. These limitations became particularly visible during periods of accelerated global digital transformation and post-pandemic educational adjustment.

In addition, students studying in less internationalised universities may experience fewer opportunities for intercultural engagement, overseas academic exchange, and global competency development. Although universities may formally promote internationalisation strategies, actual multicultural educational experiences often remain limited within daily teaching and institutional practice. These institutional inequalities demonstrate that multicultural education implementation is closely associated with governance capacity, organisational adaptability, resource allocation, and digital infrastructure. As a result, implementation outcomes remain highly uneven across Chinese universities despite the continued expansion of national higher education internationalisation policies.

Digital Transformation and Governance Capacity

Digital transformation increasingly functions as a governance mechanism shaping institutional coordination, curriculum delivery, and international academic interaction within higher education systems (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Universities

increasingly rely on digital learning platforms, AI-supported educational technologies, and online governance systems to facilitate academic administration and international collaboration. The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly transformed educational management, teaching methods, student interaction, and institutional governance structures within universities. Online learning systems, virtual classrooms, cloud-based academic management platforms, and AI-supported educational technologies increasingly influence how universities organise internationalisation and multicultural educational practices. As higher education systems become more digitally integrated, universities are expected to develop flexible governance mechanisms capable of supporting transnational academic communication and intercultural learning interaction.

Following the post-pandemic acceleration of global digitalisation, virtual internationalisation has become an increasingly important component of higher education internationalisation. Universities now utilise online exchange programmes, virtual mobility initiatives, international collaborative classrooms, and digital intercultural learning platforms to maintain international academic cooperation and student interaction across national boundaries. Digital transformation therefore expands opportunities for international educational participation beyond traditional physical mobility programmes. However, digital transformation remains highly uneven across institutions. Universities differ significantly in technological infrastructure, digital governance capacity, financial resources, and faculty digital competence (Selwyn, 2022). Well-resourced universities are generally more capable of integrating digital governance systems and international online learning environments into institutional practice, whereas less-resourced institutions often experience difficulties in technological implementation and organisational adaptation.

Digital governance capacity increasingly influences universities' ability to coordinate curriculum delivery, student services, academic administration, and intercultural educational support. Universities with stronger technological resources are often better positioned to establish online intercultural communication platforms, virtual international learning environments, and AI-supported academic management systems. In contrast, institutions with weaker digital infrastructure may struggle to maintain effective international educational coordination and sustainable multicultural engagement. Faculty digital competence also plays an important role in multicultural education implementation. Teaching staff increasingly require the ability to utilise online teaching platforms, digital communication tools, and intercultural learning technologies within internationalised educational environments. Universities with stronger faculty training systems and digital support mechanisms are generally more capable of adapting to rapidly changing educational technologies and global academic interaction models.

In addition, digital inequality may further reinforce institutional disparities rather than reduce them. Universities with stronger governance capacity and technological infrastructure are more capable of supporting international academic communication, flexible online learning, and multicultural educational participation. By comparison, resource-constrained universities may continue to face challenges related to technological investment, digital governance coordination, and online educational accessibility. Consequently, uneven digital capability may intensify implementation disparities across higher education institutions. The influence of AI-supported

educational technologies has also become increasingly significant in recent years. Universities increasingly apply AI systems in academic administration, student management, online learning analytics, and educational decision-making processes. Although these technologies may improve administrative efficiency and institutional coordination, they may also generate new governance challenges related to technological inequality, educational accessibility, and institutional adaptability.

Furthermore, digital transformation should not be understood solely as a technological issue. Instead, it increasingly represents a governance issue involving institutional coordination, organisational flexibility, policy implementation capacity, and resource allocation. Universities with stronger governance adaptability are generally more capable of integrating digital technologies into internationalisation strategies and multicultural educational systems. By contrast, fragmented governance structures and weak institutional coordination may reduce implementation effectiveness despite technological expansion.

Table 2 further summarises the major structural factors contributing to the implementation gap in multicultural education.

Table 2. Factors Contributing to the Implementation Gap

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Factor	Influence on Multicultural Education
 Institutional Constraints	Uneven governance structures, limited administrative coordination, and insufficient institutional capacity reduce implementation effectiveness across universities.
 Digital Inequality	Unequal digital infrastructure, limited online learning platforms, and insufficient technological resources restrict online intercultural interaction and international academic collaboration.
 Resource Allocation	Uneven funding distribution leads to unequal curriculum implementation, limited multicultural support services, and insufficient internationalisation investment.
 Faculty Internationalisation	Differences in faculty international experience, intercultural teaching competence, and professional development opportunities affect the quality of multicultural education.
 Global Political Environment	Geopolitical uncertainties, policy restrictions, and international tensions reduce the stability of academic cooperation and limit the sustainability of internationalisation initiatives.

Overall, digital transformation increasingly shapes governance capacity, organisational coordination, and multicultural education implementation within higher education internationalisation. Nevertheless, uneven digital capability and institutional inequality continue to influence the sustainability and effectiveness of multicultural educational practices across Chinese universities.

Implementation Gap in Multicultural Education

The implementation gap represents the divergence between internationalisation policy objectives and actual institutional practice (Pressman & Wildavsky, 2020). In the context of Chinese higher education, this gap is shaped by institutional constraints, governance fragmentation, digital inequality, and differences in organisational adaptability. Although universities increasingly promote multicultural education and internationalisation strategies, implementation outcomes remain inconsistent across institutions. Elite universities generally demonstrate stronger implementation effectiveness due to more stable governance systems, higher levels of internationalisation, and greater institutional flexibility. Meanwhile, many resource-constrained universities continue to face limitations in curriculum delivery, intercultural programme coordination, faculty development, and student support systems (Marginson, 2023).

International political environments also influence higher education internationalisation and multicultural education implementation. Changes in geopolitical relations, international policy environments, and global educational governance increasingly affect transnational academic cooperation and international programme sustainability (UNESCO, 2024). As a result, multicultural education implementation should be understood not only as an educational issue, but also as a governance issue shaped by broader structural and global conditions. Overall, the findings indicate that multicultural education outcomes are influenced not simply by internationalisation expansion itself, but by the interaction between institutional governance capacity, digital transformation, organisational adaptability, and implementation effectiveness. These findings further suggest that the implementation gap functions as a central mediating mechanism linking institutional conditions and multicultural education outcomes across Chinese universities.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of multicultural education within the context of higher education internationalisation in China. The findings indicate that multicultural education outcomes remain uneven across universities despite the continuous expansion of internationalisation policies and international academic cooperation programmes. Differences in institutional governance capacity, digital infrastructure, organisational adaptability, and internationalisation intensity significantly influence implementation effectiveness. The study further demonstrates that digital transformation increasingly functions as an important governance mechanism shaping curriculum delivery, intercultural learning interaction, and institutional coordination. However, uneven technological resources and governance capabilities continue to reinforce disparities between highly internationalised universities and resource-constrained institutions. As a result, the implementation gap emerges as a central mediating mechanism linking institutional conditions and multicultural education outcomes. In addition, international political environments and global educational transformation increasingly affect the sustainability of higher education internationalisation and multicultural education implementation. Therefore, multicultural education should be understood not only as an educational issue, but also as a governance issue shaped by broader structural and global conditions. This paper contributes to the literature by integrating implementation theory, governance analysis, and higher education internationalisation studies into a unified conceptual framework.

The findings further suggest that the implementation gap functions as a core mediating mechanism connecting institutional conditions and multicultural education implementation outcomes across Chinese universities. Future research may further examine empirical institutional cases, policy implementation processes, and the long-term influence of digital transformation on multicultural education outcomes across universities. Additional studies may also conduct more comprehensive longitudinal empirical investigations into multicultural education implementation within different higher education contexts.

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