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Internationalization of China's Polytechnic Education: Evolution, Mechanisms, and Pathways—A Structured Narrative Review

Jine Li[1] and Yimin Gao[2]

[1, 2] International Chinese College, Panyapiwat Institute of Management, Thailand

E-mail: 1203772480@qq.com, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8741-2248

E-mail: gao1min@126.com, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3523-9900

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Research on the internationalization of China's polytechnic education has expanded rapidly, yet mechanism-based and sustainability-oriented explanations remain limited. This study synthesizes the field via a structured narrative review and proposes an integrative framework with propositions.

Methodology: A structured narrative review was conducted with systematic retrieval, screening, and tiering. Evidence was organized by themes and evidence types to trace shifts in research focus, practices, and explanations.

Results: A three-stage trajectory emerges: descriptive accounts, policy-driven expansion, and a recent turn to quality upgrading and mechanisms. Divergence is driven by whether external pressures are converted into repeatable capability through governance, closed-loop routines, incentive embedding, and quality assurance, under constraints of resources, partner structures, and cross-border regulatory distance.

Conclusion: High-quality internationalization depends less on the volume of outward projects than on whether external pressures are translated into routinized organizational capability through governance, closed-loop routines, and quality assurance. The driver–device–pathway–performance framework and propositions, therefore, provide a basis for future mechanism testing and for advancing more sustainable internationalization.

Keywords: Polytechnic Internationalization; Structured Narrative Review; Organizational Change; Governance Mechanisms; Quality Upgrading

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Introduction

Against the policy momentum of the Belt and Road Initiative and the sustained push for vocational education internationalization, Chinese polytechnic colleges are transitioning from program expansion to system building and quality enhancement (Bai & An, 2024; Lan & Wang, 2023). Yet, practice-oriented reports repeatedly highlight organizational dilemmas—particularly difficulties in resource integration, path-breaking, and distinctive positioning—often manifested in high coordination costs, limited sustainability of initiatives, and misalignment between institutional arrangements and capability supply (Lan & Wang, 2023). In the broader internationalization literature, internationalization is widely framed not as a simple aggregation of outward activities, but as a complex organizational process that reshapes governance, routines, and capabilities (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2011).

Despite a growing body of descriptive work, two mechanism-centered gaps remain salient in the field: (1) how external internationalization pressures are translated into internal organizational change actions and pathways, and (2) why institutional nature (public vs. private) is associated with differentiated strategic responses and effectiveness. Organizational change research suggests that environmental stimuli typically lead to intertwined adjustments in structure, processes, and capabilities, often evolving through both incremental and episodic dynamics (Weick & Quinn, 1999; Pettigrew, 1990). Meanwhile, institutional theory emphasizes legitimacy pressures and isomorphic mechanisms that shape why organizations change and why forms of change may converge or diverge across institutional contexts (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995; Scott, 2014). These lenses jointly imply that cross-college variation in internationalization outcomes is likely driven by differences in how institutional environments, governance arrangements, and organizational capabilities are coupled—not merely by the volume of projects. These unresolved issues weaken both the theoretical explanation and the practical design of high-quality internationalization strategies in Chinese polytechnic education.

Accordingly, this review centers on the organizational change mechanisms underlying the internationalization of Chinese polytechnic colleges and adopts a structured narrative review approach. It maintains the interpretive strength of narrative synthesis for complex processes while improving transparency through explicit scope, screening logic, and a coding scheme. Evidence will be organized along two backbone logics—Driver–Process–Outcome and Contingency–Pathway–Effectiveness—and synthesized across key practice domains, such as standards export and accreditation, overseas workshops, “major + less-commonly-taught language” integration, and international student education. By doing so, the review not only consolidates dispersed evidence in the field but also provides an interpretive basis for understanding how high-quality

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internationalization can be translated from policy aspiration into organizational capability and sustainable performance.

Review Method

This study employs a structured narrative review to synthesize complex, process-oriented evidence with transparent scope, screening rules, and a coding scheme.

Search & sources: Academic databases were the primary sources; policy/sector materials were used to contextualize practice domains; snowballing was applied via reference tracing. Keywords covered two bundles: internationalization (polytechnic / vocational + internationalization / overseas provision / standards export / overseas workshops / international students) and organizational mechanisms (change / governance / process / coordination / capability / culture / institutional pressure / legitimacy).

Inclusion/exclusion: Included studies focus on polytechnic internationalization, cover key practice domains, and provide organizational-level mechanism signals; excluded were weakly related items, promotional/news texts, duplicates without new evidence, and studies lacking codable information.

Screening & quality: Deduplication ⟶ title/abstract screening ⟶ full-text screening, with consistency checks for borderline cases. Evidence was tiered: Tier A (core empirical/rigorous cases), Tier B (supportive policy/institutional/theoretical), Tier C (context only).

Extraction & coding: Standard fields were extracted (context, design, practice domain, organizational elements, outcomes, mechanism signals). Coding followed a deductive-to-inductive iterative refinement.

Synthesis: Evidence was organized along Driver–Process–Outcome and Contingency–Pathway–Effectiveness logics to produce traceable thematic chains and an integrative framework.

Landscape & Evolution

1. A three-stage evolution of themes and paradigms

A structured narrative reading suggests a clear co-evolution between China's vocational (including higher vocational) education internationalization practices and the academic agenda. Stage 1 (≤2015) is dominated by descriptive and exploratory work, typically documenting early forms such as joint programs, staff/student exchanges, and imported curricula, with limited theorization and weak critical explanation. Stage 2 (2016–2020) shifts toward a policy-driven expansion logic. With the Belt and Road agenda and "VET going global" gaining salience, studies often organize evidence around policy interpretation, model typologies, and problem lists, implicitly assuming a linear chain from external policy pressure to internal institutional response

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(Feng, 2018). Stage 3 (2021–present) increasingly targets "quality upgrading" and mechanism explanation. The focal questions move from "what/how much has been done" to "why it works/does not work and how it can be sustained," foregrounding meso-level mechanisms such as governance, resource allocation, cross-actor coordination, and change capability building (Xiao, 2021; Wu, 2024). This trajectory aligns with organization change scholarship that accumulates from outcome description to process explanation and recognizes multiple generative motors (life-cycle, evolutionary, dialectic, and teleological change) (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

2. Expanding strategic measures

At the level of implementation carriers, the field shows a portfolio-style pattern of "multiple co-existing modes" that increasingly operate in combination. A government-led mode emphasizes institutional supply, platform building, and policy steering (Bai & An, 2024; Wang & Hou, 2023). A school–enterprise mode couples training with outward place-based skill formation (Li, 2017). A school–school mode focuses on mutual recognition and resource exchange, but can suffer governance deficits—"signing without implementation"—when collaboration is symbolic rather than operational (Feng, 2018).

As complexity rises due to regulatory differences, QA requirements, and sustainability constraints, single-mode initiatives become insufficient, and practice increasingly shifts toward hybrid, multi-actor governance (government–school–enterprise–industry). Institutional theory provides a useful lens here: under legitimacy pressures and isomorphic competition, organizations strategically mix conformity and differentiation to stabilize critical resources and reduce coordination costs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

3. From scale expansion to high-quality development

In the quality-upgrading stage, constraints are increasingly framed as coupled and systemic rather than single-factor "resource shortage." Priority themes include localized governance of overseas entities (authority boundaries and governance structures), embedding incentives and evaluation into internal systems, cross-department workflow integration, internationally competent faculty and curricula, and digitalized resource sharing and QA infrastructure (Tang, 2022; Wang & Wu, 2024; Wu, 2024). From a change-management perspective, this phase requires institutionalization so that internationalization becomes routine, embedded in governance arrangements, closed-loop processes, and QA infrastructures (Lewin, 1947).

4. Shared conclusions and persistent gaps

Three gaps remain salient. First, macro-policy narratives and project descriptions still outweigh dynamic studies of organizational processes and mechanisms, producing an imbalance of "more macro stories, fewer process explanations" (Lan & Wang, 2023). Second, VET's sectoral specificity—boundary-crossing roles, policy dependence, resource constraints, and industry

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coupling—is under-theorized, limiting the explanatory power of imported organization-change concepts (Xiao, 2021). Third, China's multi-logics environment (administrative and market logics intertwined) demands stronger contextual explanations of strategic choice and pathway formation. Collectively, these gaps point to a sharper future agenda: conceptualizing VET internationalization as a strategic organizational change process and strengthening inference through cross-case comparison, process tracing, and mechanism testing.

Structured Narrative Synthesis

1. Driver–Process–Outcome

The narrative evidence indicates that internationalization in Chinese polytechnic colleges is initiated by institutional and competitive pressures that jointly shape organizational agendas. National policies provide legitimacy and access to resources while intensifying performance expectations and isomorphic competition, motivating colleges to adopt visible internationalization actions to secure recognition and support (Bai & An, 2024; Wu, 2020). From an institutional perspective, organizations balance conformity and differentiation under legitimacy pressure and resource constraints, which helps explain why similar policy environments still produce divergent strategies and outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995).

2. Contingency–Pathway–Effectiveness

External drivers do not automatically generate effectiveness; the decisive factor is whether colleges build organizational devices that can carry change. The synthesis highlights governance arrangements and authority boundaries for cross-unit coordination, closed-loop routines for project lifecycle management, and capability systems that stabilize internationally competent faculty, transferable curriculum and standards, platform operation, and quality assurance infrastructures (Tang, 2022; Wu, 2024). Organization-change scholarship supports this logic by emphasizing co-adjustment of structures, processes, and capabilities, driven by multiple motors of change rather than by a single intervention (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

3. Pathway divergence

Performance divergence under similar policies implies contingency-dependent pathways. Three boundary conditions recur: resource endowment and governance capacity; partner-structure configurations across government platforms, enterprise global chains, and overseas institutional networks; and quality-governance pressures stemming from regulatory differences, recognition of standards, and evaluation complexity (Wang & Hou, 2023; Wu, 2020). Within these constraints, three pathway prototypes emerge: a compliance-oriented projectization pathway that prioritizes quick starts and visibility but risks shallow implementation, a platform-centered capability-building pathway that packages curricula, training, and quality assurance for

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transferability, and a hybrid co-governance pathway that couples government, schools, enterprises, and industry to reduce coordination costs and enhance sustainability (Bai & An, 2024; Wang & Hou, 2023; Feng, 2018).

4. Synthesis rules

Given the prevalence of policy interpretation and experience summaries, mechanism claims should be weighted toward traceable organizational evidence rather than policy aspiration. Robust synthesis anchors explanations in observable devices such as governance arrangements, lifecycle routines, incentive–evaluation embedding, quality assurance infrastructures, and transferable outputs, while stating boundary conditions explicitly. The transition from pilots to routine operation requires institutionalization, meaning that effective practices are embedded into norms and daily operation, consistent with classic change thinking on stabilizing change through organizational embedding (Lewin, 1947).

Integrative Framework & Propositions

1. Integrative framework

This study conceptualizes polytechnic internationalization as an organizational change process in which institutional and competitive pressures trigger visible internationalization actions, organizational devices translate actions into capability, pathways diverge under contextual constraints, and performance is realized as quality and sustainability (Bai & An, 2024; Wu, 2020). Institutional theory explains divergence under similar policy environments because organizations balance conformity for legitimacy with strategic differentiation under constraints (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995).

The framework assumes that performance divergence is driven less by whether colleges "do internationalization" and more by whether they "convert internationalization into organizational capability." This conversion depends on three nested devices: governance arrangements and authority boundaries enabling cross-unit and cross-border coordination, closed-loop routines for project life-cycle management, and capability and quality assurance infrastructures that stabilize transferable outputs such as curricula packages, standards, and evaluative routines (Tang, 2022; Wu, 2024; Wang & Wu, 2024). Organization-change scholarship further supports this logic by emphasizing co-adjustment of structures, processes, and capabilities under multiple motors of change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). At the strategy level, three pathway prototypes are synthesized: compliance-oriented projectization, platform-centered capability building, and hybrid co-governance coupling government–school–enterprise–industry actors (Feng, 2018; Wang & Hou, 2023; Bai & An, 2024).

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2. Constructs

Internationalization performance is defined as high-quality outcomes, including QA effectiveness, sustainability of resources, transferability of curricula and standards, and long-term governance performance (Wang & Wu, 2024; Wu, 2024). Organizational devices refer to institutional and process configurations that carry capability conversion, such as governance clarity, closed-loop routines, and embedded incentive–evaluation systems (Tang, 2022). Capability denotes repeatable competence to generate and replicate internationalization outputs through coordination, execution, and learning, standards/curriculum development, and QA routines (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Contextual constraints include institutional pressure, resource constraints, partner structure, and regulatory distance that increase adaptation costs and QA pressures (Suchman, 1995; Wu, 2024). Institutional nature (public vs. private) shapes governance flexibility, resource channels, and accountability structures, thereby conditioning device effectiveness and pathway choice.

3. Propositions

P1. Stronger institutional pressure increases the intensity of initiating visible internationalization actions aimed at legitimacy and compliance (Bai & An, 2024; Wu, 2020).

P2. The effect of institutional pressure on high-quality performance is mediated by organizational devices; clearer authority boundaries and stronger closed-loop routines enable capability conversion (Tang, 2022; Wu, 2024).

P3. Embedded incentive–evaluation systems strengthen the positive effect of organizational devices on performance by stabilizing investment expectations and coordination alignment (Tang, 2022).

P4. Under stable resources and stronger QA foundations, platform-centered capability building outperforms compliance-oriented projectization in generating transferable outputs and sustainable performance (Bai & An, 2024; Wang & Wu, 2024).

P5. As regulatory distance and QA pressures increase, hybrid co-governance becomes more effective than single-actor approaches by distributing adaptation costs and enhancing negotiation capacity for recognition and QA (Wang & Hou, 2023; Wu, 2024).

P6. The impact of transferable outputs on long-term performance is stabilized through institutionalization; embedding effective practices into routines and learning mechanisms improves performance persistence (Lewin, 1947; Wu, 2024).

P7. Moderation of institutional nature. Institutional nature moderates the device–performance relationship: under different governance constraints and resource channels, the same set of governance, routine, and incentive devices translates into high-quality performance with varying efficiency, leading to divergent pathway choices and outcomes.

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Gaps & Future Research Agenda

1. Theoretical gaps

The literature often frames internationalization as a linear sequence of policy push, project rollout, and reported outcomes. This emphasizes what is done and how much is done, but under-specifies organizational mechanisms that explain why initiatives work or fail and how they become sustainable. Key unanswered questions include how external pressure is translated into governance arrangements, closed-loop routines, and capability systems, why pathways diverge, and under what conditions they break down.

2. Methodological gaps

Evidence is dominated by static and descriptive designs, with limited process-oriented and comparative research, resulting in a synthesis that is easy to summarize but hard to test. Future work should adopt systematic process tracing and cross-case comparison, aligning organizational process data with performance indicators to enable mechanism testing rather than relying on experience-based summaries.

3. Contextual gaps

Sector specificity and cross-border institutional differences are often insufficiently modeled, leading to overly generalized explanations. Future studies should explicitly incorporate contextual conditions such as resource constraints, partner-structure stability, compliance and quality-governance pressures, and multi-actor coordination complexity, and clarify how these conditions shape pathway choice, coordination costs, and performance ceilings.

4. Future agenda

A compact agenda can focus on four directions: conceptualize internationalization as an organizational change process and specify the links among drivers, devices, pathways, and performance; identify and operationalize key organizational devices such as authority structures, closed-loop routines, incentive embedding, and quality-assurance infrastructures; map pathway prototypes to boundary conditions to explain when projectization, platform-based capability building, or hybrid co-governance is most suitable; and strengthen measurement of transferable outputs and long-term performance, prioritizing routinization capability over short-term project counts.

Conclusion

This structured narrative review synthesizes the evolution of research on the internationalization of China's vocational (including polytechnic) education and advances an integrative explanation anchored in organizational change. The evidence suggests a clear shift from early descriptive accounts and project listings toward quality upgrading and mechanism-

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oriented inquiry, indicating that the core challenge has moved from "doing projects" to "building capabilities." Accordingly, internationalization is best conceptualized as a systemic process in which external pressures initiate action, organizational devices convert action into capability, pathways diverge under contextual constraints, and institutionalization stabilizes performance over time. Under varying conditions of resources, partner structures, regulatory distance, and quality-governance pressures, colleges tend to follow differentiated pathways such as compliance-oriented projectization, platform-based capability building, and hybrid co-governance. Performance divergence ultimately reflects whether internationalization is converted into routinized, transferable organizational capability and sustainable operating mechanisms. Building on these insights, this review proposes a driver–device–pathway–performance framework and a set of testable propositions. These provide a more focused entry point for future process tracing, cross-case comparison, and mechanism testing, while also informing policy and institutional efforts to move from scale expansion toward high-quality internationalization.

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