

Research on the Current Situation, Challenges, and New Development Opportunities of China-Italy Higher Education Cooperation

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Abstract. Globalization has quietly redrawn the map of higher education diplomacy. Universities are no longer just places where knowledge circulates; they have also become meeting points where national interests, cultural imagination, and soft power take shape. In that setting, China–Italy cooperation in higher education has become hard to ignore. People often describe it as a tidy win–win arrangement, yet the lived reality is more textured. The partnership does create shared gains—new programs, new networks, new opportunities—but it also brings to the surface the kinds of frictions that appear when two academic cultures try to plan, teach, and evaluate work in the same room. This paper takes a grounded look at what China–Italy cooperation actually looks like on the ground, and why it matters beyond the campus gates. It focuses on how cultural distance and language barriers can quietly thin out educational quality and slow academic exchange—not through spectacular disagreement, but through the small things: a concept that lands differently in translation, an email chain that grows longer because no one wants to be misunderstood, a student or supervisor who feels worn down by the constant effort of translating context, not just vocabulary. Those micro-frictions may sound minor, but they add up, and over time they shape whether cooperation feels energizing or exhausting. At the same time, the study leans into a more interesting question: when educational systems do not match, should we assume the goal is to “fix” the mismatch? Or might some differences be worth keeping—even worth using—because they create the productive tension that pushes institutions to rethink habits they take for granted? From curriculum design and credit recognition to supervision norms and student mobility, the China–Italy case suggests that “difference” can act as both a brake and an engine, depending on how partners choose to handle it. The paper therefore does more than list obstacles. It evaluates the strategic value of China–Italy educational collaboration in a world where international influence increasingly rests on talent flows, research networks, and cultural legitimacy. It also proposes practical pathways—rooted in institutional governance and everyday academic practice—to strengthen cooperation, improve competitiveness, and widen the global educational presence of both countries. The aim is not to offer polished optimism, but to provide recommendations that policymakers and university leaders can actually use—recommendations that help cooperation endure beyond memoranda, photo opportunities, and ceremonial speeches. In the end, China–Italy partnership offers a useful lens on how higher education can function as a bridge between East and West: imperfect, occasionally messy, and, when handled with care, quietly transformative.

Keywords: higher education, localized internationalization, China-Italy cooperation

1. Introduction

At the point where globalization meets an increasingly multipolar world, higher education cooperation has become more than a polite academic exercise. It is, in many respects, a quiet arena where countries test their soft power—through talent mobility, research networks, and the cultural credibility their universities project abroad. China and Italy make an especially revealing pairing. As influential representatives of Eastern and Western civilizational traditions, their educational engagement carries a double weight: the long-standing ideal of “mutual learning between civilizations,” and the very practical pressures created by shifting patterns of global governance.

Since China and Italy established diplomatic relations in 1970, their educational ties have grown steadily over more than five decades. What began as relatively limited exchanges has evolved into a multi-layered cooperation network, shaped in particular by the “Marco Polo Program” and the “Turandot Program.” These initiatives have done more than move students across borders; they have helped normalize institutional partnerships in fields ranging from the arts to engineering and technology. By 2025, the cooperation landscape includes 45 partner higher education institutions and 9 joint laboratories. China has, for many years, remained Italy’s largest source of international students, while the number of Italian students studying in China also ranks among the highest in Europe. Put differently, this is not symbolic cooperation—it is sustained, people-driven interaction, with all the complexity that implies. And when thousands of students, faculty members, and administrators learn to work through each other’s academic habits, the result is rarely simple “integration”; it is more often a mix of friction, adaptation, and occasional breakthroughs that only happen when systems meet.

Studying China–Italy higher education cooperation, then, is not just an exercise in description. It offers real theoretical leverage and clear practical value. From a civilizational vantage point, Italy—often cast as the birthplace of the Renaissance—still carries a visible humanistic imprint in the way it thinks about education. It tends to reward critical inquiry, argumentation, and the slow cultivation of creativity, the kind that comes from learning to see a problem from more than one angle [1]. China, by contrast, often frames education around the mission of cultivating virtue and nurturing people, with a strong emphasis on knowledge transmission alongside social responsibility and collective contribution. The point here is not to rank these approaches. The China–Italy relationship is analytically rich precisely because the contrast is so concrete: it lets researchers watch how complementarities take shape in real institutional settings—and, just as revealing, why they sometimes remain theoretical rather than turning into workable practice.

The strategic implications make the case even harder to dismiss. Both countries now place innovation-driven development near the center of national policy, linking higher education to industrial upgrading and long-term sustainability. In that environment, university cooperation plays a dual role. It works as cultural glue—building trust, shared vocabulary, and channels for mobility—while also functioning as enabling infrastructure for research collaboration, technological diffusion, and industrial renewal. So the real question is not whether universities matter for competitiveness; they plainly do. The more demanding question is how cross-border cooperation can be designed so it produces durable value—stable programs, credible joint research, real talent pipelines—rather than short-lived projects or agreements that look impressive in headlines and then quietly fade from view.

Still, cooperation does not run on goodwill alone. China–Italy partnerships face familiar obstacles: mismatched educational systems, uneven language capacity, and persistent financial constraints. So the immediate problem is fairly straightforward: how can both sides deepen cooperation while protecting quality and ensuring that opportunities do not remain concentrated in a small number of elite programs? A related issue is emerging just as quickly. With artificial intelligence, green development, and other fast-moving domains reshaping research and training needs, transnational

education is undergoing digital transformation—sometimes by design, sometimes simply because institutions have no choice. What does “cross-border education” look like when classrooms, laboratories, and supervision increasingly operate through platforms rather than physical mobility?

This study responds to these questions by moving beyond the regionally bounded habits of traditional comparative education research. It examines successful China–Italy cooperation cases and, more importantly, the underlying logic that makes them work. The analysis treats cultural difference not merely as a source of misalignment, but as something that can—under certain conditions—be converted into a driver of innovation. In doing so, the study offers a perspective that may help enrich a theory of higher education internationalization with Chinese characteristics, while also engaging broader debates on “localized internationalization” and “de-Westernization.” If global higher education governance is to become more plural and less dependent on Eurocentric and American-centric assumptions, then cases like China–Italy cooperation matter—not as slogans, but as empirical evidence that alternative pathways are possible, even if they remain contested and unfinished.

2. Characteristics of higher education in China and Italy and trends in internationalization

2.1. Characteristics of the higher education systems in China and Italy

China and Italy, each shaped by long and influential cultural traditions, occupy distinct places in the global higher education landscape. Setting their university systems side by side does more than satisfy comparative curiosity. It shows, in fairly concrete terms, how educational philosophy turns into institutional design, classroom habits, and talent development—and it also gives us a more realistic basis for imagining what “meaningful” international cooperation might look like once the meetings end and the semester begins.

Italy’s comparative strength is easiest to see in music, fine arts, and other creative fields, where centuries of tradition still show up as institutional capacity rather than museum nostalgia. These disciplines are not treated as decorative extras. They receive steady investment and, in many cases, deliberate pressure to stay relevant to contemporary practice. Design education offers a useful example. Many programs now fold emerging technologies into training that keeps one eye on market demand, so graduates leave with skills they can actually use rather than a portfolio built for yesterday’s industry [2]. If a metaphor helps, Italy’s student-centered approach—rooted in humanistic tradition—often resembles a well-run studio: students get room to experiment, to make mistakes without being punished for them, and to refine their work over time, but they are also expected to stand behind what they create. That blend of freedom and responsibility helps explain why “innovation” in Italian higher education is not limited to laboratories; it also appears in workshops, conservatories, rehearsal halls, and design rooms.

China’s higher education system grew out of a different set of priorities and historical influences. Policy and institutional practice emphasize the cultivation of well-rounded socialist builders and successors, with development framed across moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic dimensions [3]. In everyday teaching, this ambition often takes a familiar form: strong emphasis on foundational knowledge, carefully structured curricula, and disciplined classroom routines. The logic is fairly intuitive. When a system educates a very large population, coherence and standardization become tools for protecting baseline quality, and rigorous training becomes a way to make outcomes more predictable. Confucian traditions remain visible as well, especially in the respect for learning as cumulative—something built step by step—alongside modern expectations that graduates demonstrate broad competence rather than narrow specialization.

Comparison, however, also reveals where China’s system could sharpen its edge. One recurring issue is differentiation across degree levels. China has a well-established three-tier structure (Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate), yet curriculum design and training objectives do not always

feel sufficiently distinct from one level to the next. When those boundaries blur, programs can struggle to match different student needs with appropriately tailored outcomes, and resources may be used less efficiently than they could be. A second challenge lies in disciplinary distinctiveness: China's university sector is vast, but many institutions still build similar discipline portfolios and training models, which can dilute differentiation and make it harder for universities to develop clearly recognizable strengths. China's university sector is enormous and still expanding, but many institutions continue to build similar discipline portfolios and training models. The result can be a kind of academic convergence: fewer clearly differentiated strengths, and weaker incentives for universities to develop signature areas that reflect national priorities and institutional identity. If every campus aims to look broadly the same, who ends up leading—and in what, exactly?

These contrasts are not simply “differences” for the sake of comparison. They also hint at where complementarity might be found. Italy's strengths in humanistic, practice-oriented creativity and China's emphasis on systematic training and broad capacity-building could, under the right institutional arrangements, reinforce rather than frustrate each other. In that sense, the differences themselves can become an entry point for cross-cultural educational innovation—so long as both sides treat cooperation as an ongoing process of design and adjustment, not merely exchange in name.

2.2. Trends in the internationalization of higher education in China and Italy

Italy's universities did not drift into internationalization by chance, and they did not “discover” it in a single policy cycle. They have been working outward for decades, adjusting course as Europe—and the wider world—kept changing around them. A turning point came in 1999, when the education ministers of 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration [4]. The ambition was big, but the mechanism was practical: align degree structures, make qualifications easier to recognize across borders, and move from a scattered patchwork of national systems toward something that felt like a coherent European higher education space. When the European Higher Education Area was formally established in 2010, that agenda became less a vision statement and more a set of institutional habits [4]. For Italy, the EHEA did not merely standardize procedures; it pushed universities toward a more outward-facing posture, where mobility and comparability became built-in expectations rather than optional extras managed only by a handful of well-resourced institutions.

Over time, Italy also began to think beyond a “Europe-first” horizon and treated internationalization as a national strategy with global reach. In 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of the Interior jointly created a working group to promote Italian higher education abroad, which helped generate the “2017–2020 Italian Higher Education Internationalization Strategy” [5]. This kind of cross-ministerial alignment is more than bureaucratic tidiness. It signals that internationalization is not only an academic project; it is interwoven with diplomacy, migration governance, and national competitiveness. More recently, Italy introduced the “Italian Higher Education Internationalization Strategy (2024–2026),” with the aim of deepening international engagement, strengthening talent development, and widening channels for cooperation [5]. The trajectory is fairly consistent: regional integration provided the scaffolding, and Italy has used that scaffolding to build a broader global presence.

China's path has followed a different tempo—more iterative, more policy-driven, and more ready to recalibrate when conditions shift. In the early 2000s, a key inflection point came with the 2003 “Regulations on Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools,” which encouraged foreign universities and educational organizations to partner with Chinese institutions. That move reshaped China's internationalization in two ways at once. It increased China's visibility as a destination for international students, and it brought foreign curricula, governance approaches, and joint-program models into the domestic system. The Belt and Road Initiative later added another channel—less about importing internationalization and more about constructing it through networks. In 2015, China

helped establish regional alliances such as the Silk Road Universities Alliance [6], reflecting a shift toward multilateral platforms that connect institutions across regions around shared development interests.

At the same time, the very meaning of internationalization has been evolving. Scholars and practitioners have begun to pay closer attention to “localized internationalization,” a concept that pushes back against the older assumption that “international” must always mean crossing borders. Traditional models tended to revolve around students traveling abroad, universities recruiting internationally, or institutions building joint programs across national boundaries [7]. Localized internationalization takes a different route. It brings international elements into the local educational ecosystem—through curriculum design, faculty collaboration, classroom interaction, and virtual exchange—so students can encounter global diversity without necessarily leaving home. Put simply, it shifts the emphasis from “internationalization as travel” to “internationalization as environment,” and that shift is becoming harder for universities to ignore. For China, especially in the post-pandemic era, this more inclusive and accessible approach has gained urgency: it widens participation beyond those who can afford or manage overseas mobility, and it also makes internationalization more resilient when borders tighten.

That said, China’s internationalization process faces persistent headwinds. The most immediate challenge has been disruption in international student mobility. After the pandemic began, strict entry policies in many developing countries—combined with concerns about healthcare capacity and vaccination—reshaped mobility plans and interrupted student flows to destinations including China and India [6]. When mobility becomes uncertain, universities are forced to rethink recruitment, program design, and even the assumptions behind their “international” identity.

A second issue is more structural and, in some ways, harder to diagnose: the drift from internationalization toward Westernization. Global higher education remains heavily shaped by Western developed countries in terms of research agendas, publication norms, rankings logic, and governance templates. Under those conditions, internationalization can quietly become a one-way mirror—institutions look outward, but what they are really seeing is a narrow set of Western standards treated as universal. Within China’s academic community, this can create incentives to imitate external models, prioritize publication in a limited set of “international” journals, and pursue overseas talent in ways that may not always align with local needs or long-term capacity building [8]. The question, then, is not whether China should engage globally—it clearly should—but whether it can do so on terms that preserve academic autonomy and produce genuine intellectual exchange rather than a race to copy what appears dominant.

Seen together, Italy and China illustrate two distinct—but increasingly convergent—paths: Italy’s internationalization has been anchored in European institutional integration and then extended outward, while China’s has combined policy frameworks, regional network-building, and a growing interest in internationalization that is embedded locally. Both are now being tested by the same larger forces: disrupted mobility, fast-moving technological change, and the unresolved tension between global engagement and intellectual independence.

3. Case analysis of China-Italy higher education cooperation and success factors

3.1. The evolution of China-Italy higher education cooperation

Since China and Italy established diplomatic relations in 1970, their higher education cooperation has not followed a single straight line. It has grown in waves—shaped by policy windows, shifting national priorities, and the slow, practical work universities do when they try to make collaboration real. Seen from a distance, China–Italy higher education cooperation falls into three broad phases: an early period of exploration (from the establishment of diplomatic ties through the end of the twentieth

century), an expansion phase (roughly the early 2000s to around 2010), and a more recent stage defined by deeper, wider, and more systematized collaboration (2010 to the present). Across all three phases, government-to-government agreements provided something universities rarely get on their own: a stable policy floor. Instead of improvising each partnership as a one-off, institutions could build on a framework that made cooperation feel legitimate, predictable, and worth investing in.

As universities grew more confident, the cooperation agenda widened almost naturally. Early exchanges tended to cluster in the “classic” disciplines—language studies, the arts, and engineering—areas where collaboration felt culturally intuitive and administratively manageable. Over time, though, the center of gravity shifted. The agenda began to echo broader research trends and national economic priorities, and cooperation moved into faster-moving domains such as artificial intelligence, big data, and renewable energy. The format evolved as well. What used to be dominated by short visits and ceremonial memoranda increasingly gave way to joint education programs, co-designed curricula, and more integrated training pathways—arrangements that require real coordination, but also tend to produce more durable outcomes.

One telling marker of this maturity appeared in November 2024, when the China–Italy University Presidents’ Dialogue was held at Peking University, bringing together university leaders and education experts from both countries. This was not simply a photo-op. The discussions centered on how to deepen cooperation and make academic exchange more systematic. During the dialogue, Italy officially launched the “European Doubling” initiative, designed to expand student exchanges between China and European universities and strengthen joint research capacity [9]. Put plainly, initiatives like this aim to normalize what used to be boutique cooperation—making it more routine, more scalable, and less dependent on a few flagship institutions carrying the relationship on their backs.

If you look at the cooperation record overall, the accumulation of projects is hard to overlook. To date, universities on both sides have established 45 joint institutions and joint programs at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, along with 9 international cooperation laboratories. Many of these collaborations have delivered tangible outcomes not only in frontier and basic research, but also in high-tech engineering areas where applied work and industrial relevance often meet [10]. If cooperation is a bridge, these programs and laboratories are the structural supports—the beams and cables that do most of the load-bearing work, even if they remain largely invisible outside academic and policy circles. Government action has repeatedly acted as a catalyst. In 2005, the Italian government launched the “Marco Polo Program,” a flagship initiative that helped structure student mobility and institutional exchange. That same year, on July 4, China and Italy signed the Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Degrees, which established equivalence between Chinese bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees and their Italian counterparts—an administrative step that sounds technical but matters enormously for mobility and credential legitimacy. Later, on April 24, 2012, Liu Limin, then Vice Minister of China’s Ministry of Education, met with Della, Vice Minister of Italy’s Ministry of Education, University, and Research, in Rome, where they signed the Executive Plan for Educational Cooperation between the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic (2012–2015) [11]. More recently, in May 2024, China proposed an initiative to double the scale of “European Youth Exchanges to China” over the next three years. As part of this effort, China planned to offer more than 100 student exchange places to 22 Italian universities, with the explicit aim of encouraging mutual learning and deepening cultural exchange.

At the institutional level, landmark projects have continued to push the relationship forward, often by giving cooperation a physical or organizational “home.” In September 2019, Politecnico di Milano and Xi’an Jiaotong University established a Joint Design Institute and Joint Innovation Center in Xi’an, Shaanxi Province [10]. That same year, the Master’s Program in Architecture (Urban Design)

jointly run by South China University of Technology and Politecnico di Torino received approval, becoming the first Sino-foreign joint degree program in this field and filling a gap in China's joint-program landscape. By the time of the November 2024 University Presidents' Dialogue, cooperation had become sufficiently robust that many universities signed new agreements on the spot. Tongji University and Politecnico di Torino, for example, announced plans to co-establish interdisciplinary research centers, jointly train doctoral students, and develop the "Tongji University Sino-Italian Engineering Innovation College." Arrangements like these reflect a shift from exchange as "visiting" to exchange as "co-building"—shared platforms, shared supervision, shared institutional commitments.

Cooperation has also been reinforced by intellectual and policy-oriented exchange beyond universities themselves. Forums and dialogue mechanisms create spaces where ideas circulate before they become programs. During the 2024 Sino-Italian Think Tank Forum hosted by the Chinese Academy of History, participants discussed topics such as global political and economic change and its implications for bilateral cooperation, sustainable development collaboration, and the deeper logic of cultural exchange between China and Italy [12]. These discussions do not replace university partnerships, but they often shape the narrative environment in which partnerships expand: they help actors agree on priorities, identify emerging domains, and—perhaps most importantly—build the shared vocabulary needed to turn "cooperation" into operational practice.

3.2. Analysis of positive factors

The trajectory and outcomes of China-Italy higher education cooperation point to a set of enabling conditions that have made this partnership more durable than many purely symbolic exchanges. These drivers are not mysterious; they are, for the most part, structural advantages that both sides have learned to activate over time—sometimes deliberately, sometimes through the momentum of accumulated interaction.

One of the most basic, yet most consequential, factors is the steady diplomatic relationship between China and Italy. Long-term political goodwill does not automatically produce academic cooperation, but it does create a safer institutional climate—one where universities can plan beyond a single semester and where ministries can support mobility without treating it as a risk. The 2005 Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Degrees illustrates this clearly. Once the two countries removed major hurdles around credential recognition, student mobility became less of a bureaucratic gamble and more of a realistic pathway. Programs such as the "Marco Polo Program" then translated policy into practice by lowering application friction for Chinese students entering Italian comprehensive universities, offering clearer guidance on institution selection and program application routes. The "Turandot Program" did something similar for arts education, creating a more navigable channel for Chinese students in art, music, and dance to train in Italy's specialized institutions. In reality, these mechanisms matter because they reduce uncertainty. Students and families rarely commit to international study on ideals alone—they want to know the degree will count, the pathway will work, and the rules will not shift midstream.

Economic linkages form a second, often understated, engine. As global economic integration deepens, higher education cooperation increasingly follows the currents of trade, technology, and cultural industry collaboration. China and Italy have found particularly strong complementarity here. Italy's long-standing strengths in high-end manufacturing and the fashion industry sit naturally alongside China's market scale and increasingly sophisticated digital infrastructure. That combination creates concrete collaboration opportunities—curriculum co-development, internship pipelines, joint research around materials and design, and applied innovation that moves between laboratories, studios, and industry partners. When university cooperation plugs into real sectors with shared incentives, it tends to gain both resources and staying power.

Cultural attraction also plays a more powerful role than it sometimes receives credit for. Italy's cultural capital is unusually visible: the Renaissance still shapes the global imagination, and Italy's reputation in art, fashion, music, and craftsmanship gives it a kind of soft gravitational pull. Many Chinese students do not choose Italy simply because it is "Europe"; they choose it because they can picture the studios, ateliers, conservatories, and architectural heritage they want to learn from. China, of course, carries its own cultural magnetism. Its long historical arc, Confucian thought, and traditions such as calligraphy, Chinese painting, and Peking opera offer Italian students not only a different aesthetic world, but also a different way of thinking about education, discipline, and meaning-making. In many cases, it is this cultural curiosity—more than any formal agreement—that initiates the first step. Policy then makes it possible to follow through.

Finally, academic complementarity gives China–Italy cooperation its practical content. Italian universities hold deep expertise and long teaching traditions in areas such as art, design, architecture, and related creative disciplines, supported by globally recognized art academies and design schools that have shaped generations of artists and designers. Chinese universities, meanwhile, have accelerated rapidly in engineering, information technology, and artificial intelligence, producing visible research advances and expanding capacity at scale. When cooperation works well, it allows both sides to do what they cannot easily do alone: Italy can connect creative excellence to emerging technological applications, and China can link engineering intensity to design thinking and humanistic perspective. Joint research projects become the meeting room where these strengths mix—sometimes smoothly, sometimes awkwardly, but often productively. And perhaps that is the key point: the partnership benefits most when it treats difference not as something to minimize, but as a resource to be managed and translated into shared value.

4. Challenges in China-Italy higher education cooperation and feasible countermeasures

4.1. Challenges

China–Italy cooperation in higher education has expanded steadily, and in many areas it is clearly more mature than it was a decade ago. Even so, the day-to-day reality of collaboration still runs into a set of recurring constraints. Most of them are not dramatic "crises." They look more like practical friction—money that does not stretch far enough, calendars that do not line up, conversations slowed by language, and assumptions that quietly shape decisions before anyone notices. In this section, the main challenges can be grouped into four categories: funding limitations, differences in education systems, language barriers, and cognitive bias.

Funding remains one of the most stubborn bottlenecks. International cooperation is expensive in ways that are easy to underestimate until the program starts running. Student exchanges require scholarships that cover not only tuition, but also housing, insurance, and daily living costs. Joint research projects demand sustained investment in equipment, laboratory materials, data access, and the human labor that makes research move—research assistants, technical staff, and project coordination. In practice, however, neither government allocations nor university-level budgets are always sufficient to support China–Italy cooperation at the scale and stability that participants would like. When funding is thin, programs become fragile: exchanges shrink, research timelines stretch, and institutional enthusiasm can fade simply because resources do not match expectations.

Differences in educational systems create another layer of complexity, especially when institutions attempt to design joint degrees or tightly integrated curricula. Italy operates under the Bologna Process framework, with a three-cycle structure in which undergraduate study typically lasts three years, master's programs generally take two years, and doctoral programs often last three years. China also follows a three-tier model, but the rhythm is different: undergraduate programs usually last four years, master's education is split into academic degrees (often three years) and professional degrees

(often two or three years), and doctoral programs commonly take three years. These mismatched durations and structures may sound like minor administrative detail, yet they quickly become concrete problems—credit recognition, sequencing of core courses, internship timing, thesis supervision cycles, even the simple question of when students are supposed to be on campus. Joint programs can end up spending more time negotiating calendars than actually improving learning outcomes.

Language barriers are equally consequential, and they affect both sides. Italian remains a relatively less commonly taught language in China, with limited learning resources and a steeper learning curve than many students anticipate. Chinese students who aim to study in Italy often need to invest substantial time and effort in language preparation and must meet external certification requirements such as CELI or CILS. This adds cost and pressure well before the academic journey even begins. The challenge is not one-sided. For Italian faculty and students, Chinese is widely regarded as one of the more difficult languages to acquire, with its character system and tonal phonology presenting a real hurdle. In teaching and research collaboration, language gaps can lead to subtle distortions: concepts get simplified, nuance gets lost, and what should be a sharp academic exchange can turn into cautious, slow communication. When that happens, the depth and efficiency of cooperation suffer—not because either side lacks expertise, but because they cannot always express it with full precision.

A final challenge is more intangible but no less damaging: cognitive bias and incomplete mutual understanding. Effective cooperation depends on a shared grasp of how the other side evaluates academic quality, trains students, and defines “good research.” Yet differences in educational history and cultural context can leave both sides with partial or outdated impressions. Chinese universities may not fully understand Italy’s academic evaluation mechanisms or teaching traditions, while Italian universities may carry oversimplified assumptions about China’s educational philosophy or research capacity. Misperceptions can take familiar forms. Chinese partners may interpret Italy’s strength in arts education and applied training as a lack of theoretical rigor, while Italian partners may underestimate the depth of China’s research achievements and innovation capacity in science and engineering fields. These assumptions rarely appear as explicit accusations; they show up in planning meetings, in the distribution of responsibilities, in who is trusted with which part of the project. Over time, such biases can erode trust, reduce institutional enthusiasm, and make cooperation feel harder than it needs to be—even when both sides genuinely want the partnership to succeed.

4.2. Feasible countermeasures

If China–Italy higher education cooperation is to move from “working well in individual cases” to “working reliably at scale,” it needs a more deliberate governance architecture. In practical terms, that means a system in which governments provide stable direction and enabling policy, while universities coordinate day-to-day implementation and keep programs academically credible. Cooperation cannot rely on goodwill alone; it needs routines, incentives, and a shared operating model that makes collaboration easier than improvisation.

Funding is the obvious starting point, because without predictable resources even well-designed programs become fragile. Expanding financing channels is therefore not optional; it is the price of making cooperation stable rather than episodic. At the government level, both sides could set up dedicated funds to support student mobility, joint research, and the administrative backbone that keeps partnerships from stalling. Earmarked funding sends a clear signal of commitment, and—just as importantly—it reduces uncertainty for universities that have to plan programs, staffing, and budgets years in advance. Fiscal policy can also bring in resources beyond the public sector. Tax incentives, for instance, can encourage firms and social organizations to sponsor scholarships, laboratories, and exchange activities. Universities, for their part, should look beyond strictly bilateral funding. International organizations and foundations can often provide substantial support through

EU education cooperation schemes, joint research frameworks, and broader collaboration programs. A final lever is deeper university–enterprise cooperation. Enterprises can contribute funding and real-world platforms for internships or applied research, while universities provide technical expertise and talent development. When this is designed with clear incentives on both sides, it stops looking like simple sponsorship and starts functioning as a shared investment in innovation capacity and workforce pipelines.

Institutional differences, meanwhile, cannot be managed through goodwill and ad hoc emails. They require routine translation between systems—predictable mechanisms that make coordination ordinary rather than exhausting. One workable approach is to establish joint governance bodies: education system alignment working groups, course-quality supervision teams, and shared academic management committees that handle continuity issues for international students and jointly managed programs. These bodies can tackle the unglamorous questions that decide whether a joint program actually works: How will credits transfer in practice? Who has authority to approve curriculum revisions? What counts as equivalent assessment? How do thesis timelines, supervision roles, and defense requirements line up across different degree structures? Alongside these permanent arrangements, regular policy and system exchange seminars can deliver outsized value at relatively low cost. When both sides share reform updates, regulatory shifts, and implementation lessons, misunderstandings shrink, and coordination becomes faster. Over time, that shared “institutional literacy” becomes the quiet infrastructure of durable cooperation.

Language remains a stubborn bottleneck, which is why language support should be treated as infrastructure—not as a personal burden placed almost entirely on students. In China, this means investing more heavily in Italian language education: encouraging additional universities to offer Italian programs and building a broader pipeline of courses and training options. Digital platforms can amplify these efforts by providing high-quality online resources that students can use flexibly, especially before departure. Italy can take parallel steps to strengthen Chinese language education. Partnerships with local educational institutions can support Chinese-language courses and cultural lectures, while targeted scholarships can lower barriers for learners who might otherwise opt out. Encouraging Italian faculty and students to spend time in China—through short-term training, visiting appointments, or exchange semesters—often improves language competence in ways classroom study alone rarely delivers. Within active cooperation projects, universities can also add a practical layer: structured language partner mechanisms that pair participants for mutual support. Done well, this is not merely tutoring. It builds confidence, reduces daily friction, and creates informal social ties that, in many cases, outlast the formal program.

Cognitive bias is harder to address precisely because it is rarely acknowledged openly, yet it can quietly distort expectations, roles, and trust. Here, sustained cultural and institutional exchange is the most realistic remedy. Universities can broaden reciprocal visits and exchange delegations—not only for students, but also for administrators, program directors, faculty members, and research managers. Seeing a partner institution up close—how it actually runs classrooms, evaluates research, and sets priorities—corrects misconceptions more effectively than any formal brochure or policy statement. To reinforce this, China and Italy could establish a higher education information exchange platform that provides timely updates on reforms, research achievements, and cooperation projects. The aim is simple: reduce speculation by increasing the supply of accurate, accessible information. Regular China–Italy higher education cooperation forums can further support this process by creating a structured space for candid discussion, bringing together scholars, experts, and university leaders to address practical challenges—evaluation norms, governance expectations, and cooperation design—before they become sources of friction inside projects.

Taken together, these countermeasures follow a single logic: they shift cooperation from a set of individual relationships to a system with predictable funding, shared rules, usable language support,

and sustained mutual understanding. And in practice, that is often the difference between partnerships that look impressive in announcements and partnerships that are still operating—quietly, effectively—five years later.

5. Conclusion and discussion: new opportunities for China-Italy higher education cooperation

The global higher education environment is changing quickly, and not always in predictable ways. Student mobility patterns are still adjusting after years of disruption, digital tools are reshaping what “international” learning even means, and universities everywhere are being asked to deliver more—innovation, employability, research impact—often with tighter resources. In that setting, China–Italy higher education cooperation is not simply continuing along its existing track. It is entering a phase where new themes are becoming central, and where the right kind of collaboration can do two things at once: ease longstanding constraints and open genuinely new space for joint growth.

A particularly promising direction lies in emerging fields where both countries have clear strengths, but in different parts of the same value chain. Artificial intelligence is a case in point. China’s capacity in large-scale data processing and algorithm optimization could pair productively with Italy’s experience in human-centered design, human–computer interaction, and the kind of educational “scene” innovation that makes technology usable in real classrooms rather than impressive only in demonstrations. Working together, universities could co-develop intelligent teaching tools, pilot them in diverse institutional settings, and train students who can move comfortably across disciplinary boundaries—people who understand not only how models work, but also how they fit into human learning environments. And when the demand for AI talent keeps rising, as it likely will, this kind of cooperative pipeline becomes more than academic—it becomes strategic.

Green development offers a second arena where complementarity feels natural rather than forced. Italy brings substantial experience in environmental protection technologies and renewable energy, supported by long-standing industrial and policy engagement. China, meanwhile, has expanded rapidly in green development practice and policy research, with large-scale implementation experience that can generate valuable empirical insights. Joint research and training programs could connect these advantages in a way that produces both knowledge and capacity: collaborative work on clean energy systems, carbon management, sustainable urban development, and environmental governance. The wider payoff is obvious. Sustainability challenges do not respect borders, and universities are often where cross-border solutions can be explored without immediately falling into zero-sum competition.

Digital transformation may be the most immediately actionable opportunity, because it lowers the barriers that used to make international cooperation expensive and logistically fragile. Rather than relying only on physical mobility, China and Italy can co-build and share digital learning resources, establish cross-national teaching platforms, and develop blended models that combine local instruction with international content and joint supervision. Technologies such as virtual reality can support immersive learning environments—useful not only in engineering and medicine, but also in design education, architecture, heritage studies, and performing arts, where embodied experience matters. On the governance side, digital tools can also modernize educational management: smoother coordination of credits, supervision, quality assurance, and student services across institutions. If international cooperation is often slowed by administration, then improving the administrative “plumbing” can be surprisingly transformative.

Taken together, these pathways suggest that China–Italy cooperation has room to move beyond exchange as an end in itself. It can become a platform for co-innovation: building tools, training talent, producing research, and improving governance in ways that are relevant not only to the two countries, but also to wider debates about how higher education adapts to technological and geopolitical change. In that sense, deeper China–Italy collaboration is not merely a bilateral success story. It can also serve

as a practical reference for global higher education—showing how partnerships built on complementary strengths, careful design, and sustained mutual learning can remain resilient in a fast-shifting world.

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