

Policy implementation for the recruitment of high-level talent in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities: what is done, why it is done, and what can be done

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Abstract. High-level talent, as a critical strategic resource, plays a pivotal role in enabling local Sino-foreign cooperative universities to pursue upward development and achieve the goal of institutional upgrading. Smith's policy implementation process model indicates that an idealized talent recruitment policy, a supportive internal and external recruitment environment, coordinated mechanisms among implementing agencies, and the strong willingness of target groups together constitute a robust driving mechanism for attracting high-level talent to such institutions. In practice, however, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities tend to encounter a range of unintended negative effects in the process of recruiting high-level talent, including mismatches between recruited personnel and key disciplinary priorities, increased systemic risks, intensified conflicts within high-level talent groups, and difficulties in effectively utilizing performance evaluation outcomes. To promote the healthy and orderly development of high-level talent teams, these universities should refine disciplinary orientations to enhance person–position fit, conduct thorough cost–benefit analyses to mitigate human capital investment risks, resolve interest conflicts arising from talent aggregation to avoid diseconomies, and focus on appointment-based systems to establish a sound evaluation mechanism for high-level talent.

Keywords: local universities, high-level talent recruitment, policy, implementation

1. Introduction

In the report to the *20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, General Secretary Jinping Xi emphasized that "education, science and technology, and talent constitute the foundational and strategic pillars for building a modern socialist country in all respects" [1]. At present, China is in a critical stage of advancing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The demand for "high-end, cutting-edge, and scarce" talent from a global pool is more urgent than at any previous point in history, particularly to address "bottleneck" technological challenges in frontier fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum information, integrated circuits, life and health sciences, aerospace technology, and deep-earth and deep-sea exploration [2]. The pressure of national demand for high-level talent has been transmitted layer by layer to key recruiting entities, including national key laboratories, high-level universities, and research institutes. In the competition for high-

level talent, local universities—positioned at a relative disadvantage compared with "Project 211" and "Project 985" institutions—often resort to extraordinary and even disruptive measures under the impetus of the "Double First-Class" initiative [3], sometimes recruiting high-level talent at any cost [4]. Against this backdrop, several critical questions arise: What are the underlying factors that drive local Sino-foreign cooperative universities to spare no effort in recruiting high-level talent? What unintended negative effects emerge in the process of aggressive talent recruitment? And what strategies can such institutions adopt to ensure the healthy and orderly development of high-level talent teams? These constitute the core issues explored in this study.

The report to the *20th National Congress* further underscores the need to accelerate the development of universities and disciplines with Chinese characteristics that are also world-class. As the "Double First-Class" initiative represents a new policy orientation for the development of higher education in China, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities have continuously refined their policies for recruiting high-level talent in alignment with national top-level design. Theoretically, high-level talent—"by virtue of their abundant human capital, academic capital, and social capital—has become the primary target and central focus of talent competition within the 'Double First-Class' initiative" [5]. In pursuit of greater discursive advantage within this initiative, universities have exerted considerable effort to recruit individuals with prestigious academic titles and talent designations, thereby giving rise to increasingly irrational, "disordered", and "symbolic" forms of competition for high-level talent among institutions [6].

In practice, the shortage of high-level talent at H University has become a prominent issue (see Table 1), significantly constraining its progress toward the development of "first-class disciplines". Located in a third- or fourth-tier city on the northern Henan Plain, H University faces notable structural disadvantages. On the one hand, compared with universities in first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, as well as those in the eastern coastal regions, H University lacks locational advantages, offers comparatively lower remuneration, and struggles to generate a clustering effect for high-level talent. On the other hand, as it is not situated in a provincial capital, H University is often unable to benefit from the same preferential talent policies available to universities in provincial capitals. Consequently, both from a theoretical standpoint and in terms of practical necessity, the issue of high-level talent recruitment policies in local universities—exemplified by H University—has become a pressing and significant topic warranting in-depth investigation.

Table 1. Overview of high-level talent at H University (full-time)

Internal talent category	Talent type	Quantity
Leading talent	Nobel Prize laureates; recipients of the Fields Medal or the Turing Award; winners of the State Preeminent Science and Technology Award; academicians of the Chinese Academy of Sciences or the Chinese Academy of Engineering; members (including fellows or senior fellows) of top academic institutions in developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany that are equivalent to academies; distinguished talents under the National High-Level Talent Special Support Program; members of the Academic Divisions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; and other leading talents of comparable standing.	0

Table 1. Continued

Distinguished talent	<p>Distinguished Professors appointed by the Ministry of Education; selected candidates for the National High-Level Talent Innovation Program (long-term projects) and cultural and artistic talent programs; recipients of the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars; National First-Class Professors; individuals who, as the first contributor, have won one First Prize in the State Natural Science Award, the State Scientific and Technological Progress Award, or the State Technological Invention Award, or one Special Prize in National Teaching Achievement; individuals who, as first author or corresponding author, have published three or more papers in flagship journals such as Nature, Science, or Cell, or who, as first author, have published three or more papers in Social Sciences in China; tenured professors at globally renowned high-level universities (top 200 in QS World University Rankings) or equivalent positions in prestigious research institutions, with outstanding academic achievements; and other talents of comparable excellence.</p>	6
Outstanding talent	<p>National-level candidates of the "Hundred, Thousand, and Ten Thousand Talents Project"; recipients of the National Science Fund for Excellent Young Scholars; Overseas Excellent Young Scholars; selected candidates for the National High-Level Talent Program (youth and short-term projects); leading talents and young top-notch talents under the National High-Level Talent Special Support Program; Young Scholars of the Ministry of Education; selected high-level talents of the Chinese Academy of Sciences; high-level talents of Henan Province, Zhongyuan Scholars, or equivalent talents in other provinces; principal investigators of major projects under the National Natural Science Foundation of China, or chief experts of major bidding projects under the National Social Science Fund or the Ministry of Education; individuals who, as the first contributor, have won one Second Prize in the State Natural Science Award, the State Scientific and Technological Progress Award, or the State Technological Invention Award, or have received a First Prize or above in the Outstanding Scientific Research Achievement Award (Humanities and Social Sciences) of the Ministry of Education, or a First Prize in National Teaching Achievement; individuals who, within the past five years, have published two or more papers in flagship journals such as Nature, Science, or Cell as first author or corresponding author, or two or more papers in Social Sciences in China as first author; associate professors (top 200 QS ranking) or assistant professors (top 100 QS ranking) at world-renowned universities, or equivalent positions in prestigious research institutions, with strong academic performance; and other top-tier talents of comparable level.</p>	15

What are the key factors underlying the implementation of high-level talent recruitment policies in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities, as exemplified by H University, in their pursuit of institutional upgrading within the higher education system? According to the policy implementation analytical model developed by the American scholar Thomas B. Smith in 1973, idealized policy, implementing agencies, target groups, and the policy environment constitute the core determinants of policy implementation. These elements

interact dynamically and collectively shape the entire process of policy execution [7]. Within this framework, Smith—drawing on empirical studies of policy implementation in certain Third World countries—systematically identified the principal factors influencing policy implementation, with particular emphasis on implementing agencies, their leadership structures, and operational techniques. However, his model pays relatively limited attention to the distinctive features of China's political system and administrative governance structure [8]. Building upon Smith's analytical model, and taking into account China's democratic centralist political system as well as the "fragmented" higher education governance structure characterized by vertical segmentation [9], this study constructs an analytical model for the implementation of high-level talent recruitment policies in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities, as illustrated in Figure 1.

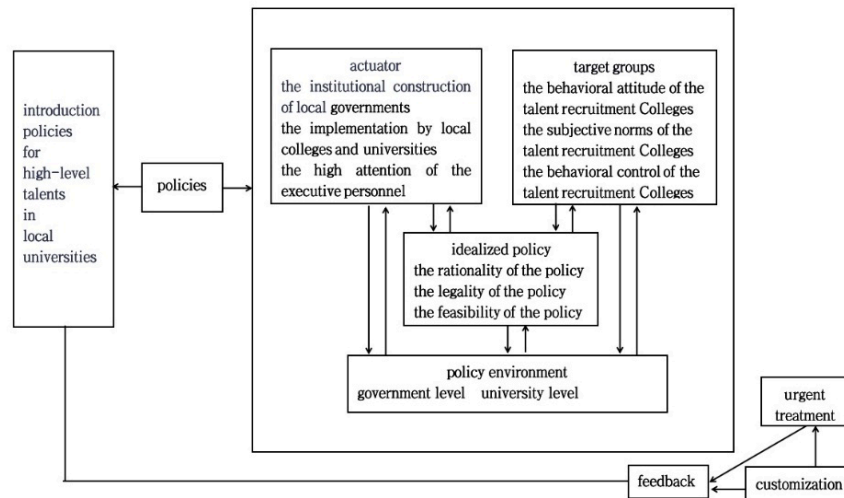


Figure 1. Analytical model of policy implementation for high-level talent recruitment in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities

2. What is done: an analysis of the factors influencing the implementation of high-level talent recruitment policies in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities

As illustrated in the idealized analytical model of policy implementation for high-level talent recruitment in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities (see Figure 1), an idealized recruitment policy, a supportive internal and external recruitment environment, coordinated mechanisms among implementing agencies, and the strong willingness of target groups jointly constitute a powerful driving mechanism for attracting high-level talent to local universities.

2.1. Idealized talent recruitment policies

According to Smith's theory of the policy implementation process, an idealized policy refers to a legitimate, rational, and inherently feasible policy scheme formulated without consideration of external disturbances. It encompasses such dimensions as policy form, type, origin, scope, and societal perceptions of the policy.

2.1.1. The sufficient legitimacy and rationality of high-level talent recruitment in local universities

Legitimacy refers to the capacity and attribute of a political authority or governing power to be perceived by the governed as justifiable and morally appropriate, thereby eliciting voluntary compliance or recognition [10].

The legitimacy and rationality of high-level talent recruitment in local universities are primarily reflected in the following two aspects.

First, authoritative statements on talent issued by national political leaders. In theoretical terms, as a form of symbolic and exhortative policy instrument, important statements by political leaders are often endowed with unquestionable legitimacy and authority. In practice, since the *18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, General Secretary Jinping Xi has, from a strategic vantage point concerning the overall development of the Party and the state, delivered a series of important expositions on talent-related work. These statements have systematically addressed major theoretical and practical questions, including why to build a talent-strong nation, what constitutes such a nation, and how to achieve it. Characterized by a distinct contemporary orientation, these expositions represent both an innovation and a development of the Party's theory on talent work [11], thereby laying a solid foundation of legitimacy for the recruitment of high-level talent in local universities.

Second, the various "talent programs" established by national and local governments. On the one hand, in pursuit of the strategic objective of national rejuvenation and gaining a competitive advantage internationally, both national and local governments have continuously launched a wide range of "talent programs" or "talent initiatives" as key policy instruments to select and recruit urgently needed high-level talent from both domestic and international sources. Examples include the "Hundred Talents Program" initiated by the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1994, the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars established by the National Natural Science Foundation of China in 1994, the "Hundred, Thousand, and Ten Thousand Talents Project" implemented by seven ministries including the former Ministry of Personnel in 1995, and the "Changjiang Scholars Award Program" launched by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Li Ka Shing Foundation in 1998. On the other hand, China's political system exhibits a pronounced characteristic of "embeddedness," whereby national-level talent programs are replicated and adapted within local government talent strategies. Examples include the "Hundred, Thousand, and Ten Thousand Talents Project" in Wuxi, the "Thousand Talents Plan" in Jiangyin, and the "321 Talent Program" in Nanjing. Taken together, these officially recognized and standardized talent programs at various levels provide a robust rational foundation for high-level talent recruitment in local universities.

2.1.2. The inevitable feasibility of collective action in high-level talent recruitment among local universities

In essence, competition among universities is fundamentally competition for government recognition—specifically, for access to the various forms of institutional authorization and educational resources allocated and controlled by the government [12]. At present, the pursuit of "Double First-Class" status constitutes a major institutional arrangement and systemic project for achieving leapfrog development in local universities. On the one hand, from the perspective of policy orientation, the *Measures for Evaluating the Effectiveness of "Double First-Class" Development (Trial)*, issued by the Ministry of Education and other authorities in December 2020, explicitly stipulate that evaluation consists of two components: overall university development and disciplinary development. The overall evaluation covers six relatively independent dimensions—talent cultivation, faculty development, scientific research, social service, cultural inheritance and innovation, and international exchange and cooperation—with results presented in an integrated manner. Disciplinary evaluation, by contrast, focuses on the comprehensive performance of key disciplines in terms of talent cultivation, scientific research, social service, and faculty development [13]. These core indicators clearly demonstrate that high-level talent has become a decisive factor and critical support for the leapfrog development of local universities. On the other hand, from the standpoint of institutional practice, H University has taken these policy-oriented objectives as its guiding targets. In its 2024 key Party and

administrative work agenda, the university explicitly set a "Double Ten" goal for the year: to recruit ten distinguished talents at the level of National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars and ten outstanding talents at the level of National Science Fund for Excellent Young Scholars. This directive itself underscores the inherent feasibility—and indeed the necessity—of high-level talent recruitment as a form of collective action among local universities.

2.2. High-level attention from implementing agencies

In the process of implementing high-level talent recruitment policies in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities, the strong commitment of both local governments and universities is crucial to achieving policy objectives.

2.2.1. *Local governments prioritize high-level talent recruitment as a key agenda item*

To enhance national core competitiveness, realize national rejuvenation, and secure a proactive position in global competition, national leaders have identified the strengthening and improvement of talent work in the new era as a critical measure for advancing the strategy of building a talent-strong nation. Efforts are concentrated on cultivating, attracting, and effectively utilizing high-level talent in frontier areas such as global scientific and technological innovation, the real economy, major national needs, and public health. On the one hand, the central government's urgent demand for high-level talent has been transmitted to local governments and incorporated into their key policy agendas. On the other hand, local governments have continuously refined the top-level design of high-level talent recruitment policies, undertaking comprehensive optimization and integrative innovation in policy formulation, inter-agency coordination, platform development, and supporting services. As a result, a relatively complete, closed-loop system for talent recruitment has been established, covering multiple talent tiers, spanning diverse fields, and encompassing the entire talent lifecycle. For instance, in April 2022, the Leading Group for Talent Work of H Provincial Party Committee introduced a comprehensive "package" of talent recruitment policies. Centered on the objective of "building a nationally significant talent hub and attracting as well as cultivating innovative talent and teams," this policy package systematically delineates responsibility allocation, recruitment, priority tasks, policy measures, operational procedures, and support mechanisms, thereby providing an integrated institutional framework for talent recruitment.

2.2.2. *Local universities continuously enhance incentive packages for high-level talent*

In order to stand out in the increasingly intense "war for talent", market-oriented recruitment has become a prevalent strategy among local universities. This approach is primarily reflected in three dimensions: diversified recruitment channels, varied recruitment mechanisms, and enhanced financial support.

First, expanding outreach through multiple recruitment channels. To achieve integrated breakthroughs in talent acquisition, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities adopt a variety of approaches, including participating in and hosting international academic conferences, engaging high-end executive search firms, strengthening scientific research and technological collaboration, and leveraging academic lineage and social networks (such as kinship ties, alumni connections, and regional affiliations). Stakeholders often recount distinctive "recruitment narratives", such as listing the direct contact details of university leaders in recruitment announcements, dispatching senior leadership teams to conduct face-to-face negotiations with prospective candidates, and demonstrating exceptional sincerity and persistence through proactive administrative engagement—thereby gradually overcoming the entrenched professional and institutional constraints of high-level talent [14].

Second, strengthening effective pathways through diversified recruitment mechanisms. In addition to establishing "one-stop" talent service systems, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities frequently create

specially designated positions or programs and establish laboratories or research institutes to attract high-level talent and research teams. These platforms typically provide not only office space, research funding, and housing support, but also substantial autonomy in personnel management, salary incentives, research funding allocation, and the commercialization of research outputs.

Third, improving compensation structures through multi-faceted funding support. To achieve more targeted recruitment, local universities often develop institution-specific standards for high-level talent recruitment, drawing on nationally recognized honors, prestigious academic titles, major awards, key talent programs, and high-level research projects conferred by government authorities. On the one hand, to intensify international recruitment efforts, some institutions include globally recognized top academic titles, prestigious international awards, and senior executives or high-ranking members of leading financial institutions (such as accounting firms, academic organizations, and Fortune Global 500 companies) within their recruitment criteria. On the other hand, universities such as H University provide differentiated and competitive remuneration packages tailored to various categories of high-level talent, including salaries, research funding, and relocation allowances (see Table 2), along with preferential policies in areas such as children's education, spousal employment, healthcare, and social security.

Table 2. Categories and Compensation Packages for High-Level Talent at H University (unit: 10,000 RMB)

Talent Category	Annual Salary	Research Funding	Relocation Allowance	Other Benefits
Leading Talent	180	Natural sciences: 3,000; Humanities and social sciences: 500–800	300	Provision of a dedicated work vehicle and at least two assistants; establishment of an academic team of 5–7 members
Distinguished Talent	120	Natural sciences: 1,000; Humanities and social sciences: 200	200	Provision of at least two assistants; establishment of an academic team of 3–5 members
Outstanding Talent	70	Natural sciences: 500; Humanities and social sciences: 150	120	Provision of one assistant; establishment of an academic team of 2–4 members

2.3. A supportive talent recruitment environment

2.3.1. Local governments: a combination of "institutional governance" and "action-oriented governance"

In the process of recruiting high-level talent, local governments tend—often implicitly—to follow two structurally distinct yet functionally complementary logics of action: one grounded in "institutional governance," and the other in "action-oriented governance".

First, "institutional governance" is rooted in a bureaucratic system. Various governmental departments at different levels, along with talent-recruiting entities, form a vertically integrated and networked chain of action based on administrative hierarchies. Within this structure, coordinating bodies—typically represented by leading groups for talent work at different levels—occupy a central leadership position. Leveraging their strong integrative capacity, these bodies facilitate both horizontal coordination among departments and vertical linkages across administrative levels, while also establishing robust incentive and constraint mechanisms. Together, these features provide both the ideological and institutional foundations for the coordinated implementation of talent recruitment policies.

Second, in order to overcome the path dependence inherent in "institutional governance", local governments often exhibit a pronounced tendency toward "action-oriented governance" in high-level talent recruitment. From a theoretical perspective, compared with institutional governance, action-oriented governance—being problem-driven and performance-oriented—enables temporary departures from routine procedures, allowing for the precise allocation of recruitment targets and supporting resources to various talent-recruiting entities.

At the practical level, to accelerate the introduction of top-tier international talent, H Province has adopted a "case-by-case deliberation" mechanism ("one case, one discussion") to streamline recruitment procedures. Specifically, (1) employing institutions may directly submit applications to the competent provincial authorities (or agencies exercising investor responsibilities) for issues that cannot be resolved internally and require case-by-case handling; (2) the provincial industry regulatory authority (or the entity performing the duties of the investor) shall submit its review comments within the specified timeframe, clearly identify the support measures that the authority can provide, and promptly inform the applicant of the implementation status.; and (3) for issues requiring coordination at the provincial level, the competent authorities report to the Provincial Leading Group for Talent Work, which, after thorough evaluation, issues task directives to relevant functional departments, thereby enabling expedited and flexible implementation through special handling procedures.

2.3.2. Local universities: a combination of "conventional" and "extraordinary" recruitment approaches

In recruiting high-level talent, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities typically adopt a hybrid approach that combines "conventional recruitment" with "extraordinary recruitment". On the one hand, "conventional recruitment" at H University is characterized by adherence to standardized requirements regarding eligibility criteria, application procedures, and contractual obligations. This form of proceduralism and emphasis on due process within the institutional talent policy framework helps to contain recruitment risks and costs within manageable and acceptable bounds.

On the other hand, in contrast to the procedural dependence of conventional recruitment, "extraordinary recruitment" is marked by distinct features of immediacy and case-specific responsiveness. "Immediacy" refers to the capacity of local universities to respond dynamically within a short timeframe when recruiting high-level talent, without being constrained by established procedures. "Case-specific responsiveness" denotes the practice of granting exceptional treatment to urgently needed and scarce talent, often without strict adherence to existing recruitment standards.

From a theoretical perspective, extraordinary recruitment offers greater flexibility in both means and modalities under specific conditions. It helps to mitigate the inertia and delayed responsiveness often associated with conventional recruitment, while also expanding the operational space for talent acquisition. From a practical standpoint, H University employs mechanisms such as "one case, one discussion" and "one individual, one policy" in its recruitment of high-level talent. For candidates who pass peer evaluation within their specialized fields, the university provides highly customized support across multiple dimensions, including financial incentives, research funding, platform development, children's education, spousal employment, and the allocation of graduate student enrollment quotas.

2.4. Proactive responses from key talent-recruiting schools

As the primary implementing actors in the recruitment of high-level talent within local Sino-foreign cooperative universities, individual schools—particularly those responsible for key disciplinary development—play a decisive role in determining whether talent recruitment policies can be effectively executed. In this

sense, positive behavioral attitudes, self-regulated normative commitments, and proactive perceived behavioral control constitute critical factors for effective policy implementation.

First, at the institutional level, local universities—under the influence of national initiatives such as "Project 211", "Project 985", and the "Double First-Class" initiative—tend to concentrate institutional resources on the development of key disciplines. This often involves preferential allocation of human, financial, and material resources to schools responsible for priority disciplines. For example, since identifying physics and chemistry as target "first-class disciplines", H University has systematically prioritized these areas in talent recruitment, professional title evaluation, funding allocation, graduate student quota distribution, and logistical support. Such preferential policies and resource prioritization create strong incentives for schools engaged in key disciplinary development to adopt a proactive and committed stance toward high-level talent recruitment. Successful recruitment not only brings access to institutional policy support but also generates additional benefits associated with the acquired talent.

Second, at the level of individual schools within the university, proactive recruitment of high-level talent yields direct financial and performance-related rewards. For instance, according to the *Measures for Rewarding Outstanding Contributions (Trial)* at H University, the successful recruitment of a leading talent at the academician level results in a reward of 1 million RMB to the host unit; the recruitment of a distinguished talent at the level of the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars yields a reward of 500,000 RMB; and the recruitment of an outstanding talent at the level of the National Science Fund for Excellent Young Scholars brings a reward of 300,000 RMB. In addition, the *Measures for Performance-Based Salary Distribution (Trial)* stipulate that the number of high-level talents recruited is directly linked to the allocation of year-end performance bonuses at the school level. Overall, these strong material incentives significantly enhance the intrinsic motivation of recruiting schools, thereby reinforcing alignment with institutional talent recruitment policies.

Finally, from the perspective of key leaders within individual schools, proactive engagement in fulfilling talent recruitment tasks assigned by university leadership not only facilitates the achievement of measurable administrative performance but also enhances prospects for career advancement. In this regard, heads of schools possess a dual identity: they function both as "economic actors", competing for institutional performance outcomes, and as "political actors", accumulating capital for career progression. This dual role drives them to actively participate in talent recruitment efforts. On the one hand, within the broader national context, the effectiveness of high-level talent recruitment has become a central criterion in the competitive evaluation of universities, thereby intensifying competition among schools for top-tier talent within their respective disciplines. At the local level, the pressure exerted by governments to recruit high-level talent is progressively disaggregated and transmitted to individual schools, imposing significant constraints on their strategic development directions. On the other hand, in practical terms, organizational departments in H Province have recently conducted multiple rounds of field research and consultations at H University regarding talent recruitment and have set explicit recruitment targets for 2024. At a recent meeting on advancing "Double First-Class" disciplinary development, the university's human resources department further decomposed these targets and assigned them to the leaders of relevant schools, thereby ensuring policy transmission and implementation at the operational level.

3. Why: unintended negative effects in the implementation of high-level talent recruitment policies in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities

Against the backdrop of the "Double First-Class" initiative, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities are prone to a range of unintended negative effects in the process of recruiting high-level talent. These include mismatches between recruited talent and key disciplinary priorities, heightened systemic risks, intensified conflicts within high-level talent groups, and difficulties in effectively utilizing performance evaluation outcomes.

3.1. Inadequate policy planning and implementation weakening the development of key disciplines

First, compared with "Double First-Class" universities, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities exhibit a more urgent demand for high-level talent and tend to formulate recruitment plans tailored to their own developmental characteristics. However, in implementing these plans, local universities must simultaneously balance institutional development needs with compliance with local government directives. For example, H Province issued formal notifications assigning annual recruitment quotas for high-level talent to key recruiting units within its jurisdiction for 2024, explicitly stipulating a supervisory mechanism of "initial reminder, secondary supervision, follow-up interview, and final public notification" for underperformance. This indicates that local governments have shifted from a backstage role to a more direct, interventionist position, often imposing recruitment targets on universities through administrative means and linking the completion of these targets to the performance evaluation of leadership teams. Such practices effectively place high-level talent recruitment at the center of a "promotion tournament" [15].

Second, the intrinsic motivation of local universities to pursue excellence becomes intertwined with local governments' strong incentives for political performance, ultimately fostering an excessive emphasis on the quantity of high-level talent. At the theoretical level, due to the absence of systematic planning or frequent ad hoc adjustments to recruitment strategies, local universities are likely to encounter mismatches between recruited talent and the needs of key disciplinary development. At the practical level, while H University has identified physics and chemistry as its target "first-class disciplines", recent and planned high-level talent recruitment has extended to fields such as life sciences, mathematics, and environmental engineering. This misalignment between talent recruitment and disciplinary planning not only undermines the efficient development of "first-class disciplines", but also significantly increases the risk associated with human capital investment.

3.2. Biased and irrational allocation of recruitment funding increasing systemic risks

Local Sino-foreign cooperative universities often face a dual tension in high-level talent recruitment: on the one hand, their aspiration for leapfrog development necessitates strong support from high-level talent; on the other hand, their financial capacity is considerably constrained compared with "Double First-Class" universities, which typically operate with budgets reaching tens of billions of RMB (see Table 3).

First, within limited budgetary resources, local universities are nonetheless required to allocate substantial dedicated funds for talent recruitment, covering high salaries, relocation allowances, and research funding. For instance, H University allocated 26.71 million RMB in research funding for high-level talent in 2023, and this figure is projected to rise sharply to 38.23 million RMB in 2024 as recruitment efforts intensify.

Second, the large-scale strategic planning associated with high-level talent recruitment entails significant economic risks. According to Sim Segal's enterprise risk management framework, strategic risk (64%) poses a

greater threat than operational risk (35%) and financial risk (1%) [16]. A similar logic applies to local universities: many institutions have adopted a "talent-driven development strategy" and are committing substantial—sometimes extraordinary—financial resources to attract high-level talent. This approach not only substantially increases the likelihood of budget overruns in talent-related expenditures but also heightens the risk of systemic financial instability in university operations.

Table 3. Budgetary expenditures of selected local universities in H Province, 2022–2023 (unit: 100 million RMB)

No.	University	2023 Budget	2022 Budget
1	ZZ University	34.34	31.23
2	HN University	23.82	21.8
3	H Agricultural University	14.99	11.31
4	H University of Animal Husbandry and Economics	12.84	7.5
5	H University	11.72	12.09
6	H University of Science and Technology	11.18	10.65
7	H University of Technology	9.43	9.32
8	XY Normal University	8.88	6.63
9	ZZ University of Light Industry	8.21	6.95
10	HB University of Water Resources and Electric Power	8.09	7.92

3.3. Inappropriate talent recruitment policies intensifying internal conflicts among high-level talent

In order to enhance their attractiveness to external candidates, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities often adopt preferential policies for incoming high-level talent while neglecting those cultivated internally. They tend to provide external recruits with superior remuneration and comprehensive support packages, including generous salaries, housing allowances, and start-up research funding. In addition, preferential treatment is often extended in areas such as team formation, allocation of postgraduate enrollment quotas, and professional title evaluation.

Taking H University as an example, on the one hand, the institution offers housing subsidies of RMB 3 million, 2 million, and 1.2 million to newly recruited leading talents, outstanding talents, and distinguished talents, respectively, whereas internally appointed personnel are no longer eligible for such housing benefits. On the other hand, H University provides fully furnished transitional housing within the faculty residential area for externally recruited leading, outstanding, and distinguished talents. However, when a professor from within the university—who met the criteria for "outstanding talent"—applied for such housing, the application was denied on the grounds that internal staff were not covered by the transitional housing policy. This form of differential treatment, which emphasizes external recruitment over actual contribution, creates a subtle yet significant imbalance between externally recruited high-level talent and internally cultivated counterparts. When overall institutional resources become constrained, or when expenditures are reduced in pursuit of efficiency, latent conflicts between these two groups are likely to intensify, thereby substantially increasing the risk of brain drain among domestically trained high-level talent.

3.4. Weak policy implementation undermining the binding force of high-level talent evaluation results

The relationship between high-level talent and local universities is characterized both as a "mutually dependent symbiosis" and as a "strategic game". Owing to their identity as "academic professionals" and their high visibility within the academic community—combined with attributes such as centrality (even exclusivity), scarcity, and irreplaceability—high-level talent typically possesses both "expert power" and "referent power" [17]. This dual form of power not only grants them substantial discursive authority and bargaining leverage in their interactions with local universities, but also, to some extent, enables them to circumvent or even override institutional regulations.

According to the ideal provisions outlined in policy documents, Article 18 of the *Measures for the Assessment of High-Level Talent at H University (Trial)* stipulates that individuals who fail to meet assessment requirements shall compensate for unfulfilled tasks through liquidated damages, calculated in accordance with relevant institutional policies such as those governing high-level research output rewards and excess workload compensation. However, in actual implementation, H University has conducted only two centralized assessments of high-level talent over the past five years. Some individuals failed to fulfill their contractual obligations, yet the assessment results were effectively shelved and left unenforced. The delayed and inadequate application of evaluation outcomes indicates that local universities occupy a relatively weak position in their strategic interactions with high-level talent. This not only undermines the authority of institutional regulations but also generates significant negative consequences that should not be underestimated.

4. What can be done: pathways for overcoming the implementation dilemmas of high-level talent recruitment policies in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities

To promote the healthy and orderly development of high-level talent teams, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities need to further refine their disciplinary orientations to enhance person–job fit, conduct rigorous cost–benefit analyses to mitigate human capital investment risks, resolve conflicts of interest arising from talent agglomeration to avoid "diseconomies", and focus on contract-based employment systems to establish sound evaluation mechanisms for high-level talent.

4.1. Refining disciplinary development directions to improve person–job fit

Person–job fit is predicated on a constructive interaction among individual attributes, job requirements, and societal needs. For local universities, imitating elite institutions by pursuing a "large and comprehensive" development model is neither realistic nor sustainable. Rather than prioritizing the "most outstanding", local universities should focus on identifying the "most suitable" candidates when recruiting high-level talent. From a macro perspective of institutional development planning, given limited financial resources, local universities should align talent recruitment strategies with their institutional positioning and operational conditions. By concentrating on advantageous disciplines and key specialties, they should formulate rational and evidence-based talent development plans, opting for a "small but refined" academic development path. This approach stands in contrast to the short-term, linear expansion logic of "recruiting based on titles alone", which seeks to produce superficially impressive "talent metrics" through expedient or accelerated means.

From a micro perspective of recruitment planning, local universities should adopt a demand-oriented approach in position setting and talent recruitment, ensuring that newly recruited high-level talent demonstrates strong alignment with the institution's missions in talent cultivation, scientific research, and social service. At the same time, equal attention must be paid to retaining existing high-level talent within the institution, so as to avoid a vicious cycle of "recruitment—attrition—re-recruitment—re-attrition" [18]. Furthermore, institutions must proactively address practical issues such as disparities in remuneration and benefits between externally recruited talent and internally cultivated, late-emerging high-level talent.

4.2. Strengthening cost–benefit analysis to reduce human capital investment risks

Local Sino-foreign cooperative universities inevitably face investment risks in recruiting high-level talent. In particular, some high-cost recruits struggle to integrate into the institutional environment and fail to deliver the expected contributions in scientific research and moral education. This phenomenon can be attributed to three primary factors: the uncertainty of individual performance, the long duration of employment contracts, and the indirect nature of returns. First, recruitment typically involves the signing of employment contracts that stipulate responsibilities in areas such as talent cultivation, scientific research, platform development, disciplinary advancement, and academic exchange. However, due to the influence of personal factors, institutional environments, and systemic mechanisms, the realization of high-level talent performance is inherently uncertain. Second, contract terms usually span three to five years, and such extended periods amplify uncertainty, thereby increasing the risk associated with human capital investment. Third, the outputs of high-level talent are generally manifested in the form of academic achievements rather than direct economic returns, making it difficult for local universities to accurately calculate return on investment.

To mitigate these risks, local universities should adopt a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, during policy formulation, they should strengthen the "fourfold ecosystem" of institutional, value-based, academic, and service dimensions to reinforce the sense of ownership among high-level talent [19]. During policy implementation, they must guard against "selection risk" by rigorously evaluating candidates' professional competence, ethical standards, and overall quality, thereby avoiding deviations from recruitment objectives. On the other hand, institutions should design scientifically grounded reward and penalty mechanisms to stimulate initiative and creativity among high-level talent, while preventing both "incentive risk" and "brain drain risk" [20].

4.3. Resolving conflicts of interest arising from talent agglomeration to avoid "diseconomies of scale"

When high-level talent becomes concentrated within one or two key disciplines, conflicts of interest may arise between externally recruited and locally cultivated talent, as well as among recruited personnel themselves. These conflicts typically center on the allocation of scarce resources such as postgraduate enrollment quotas, laboratory facilities, and research funding. Rather than generating a positive scale effect, such tensions may result in mutual constraints among talent, leading to inefficient resource allocation and a weakened agglomeration effect—ultimately producing a " $1 + 1 < 2$ " diseconomy of scale [21].

In addressing these conflicts, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities must adopt both micro- and macro-level strategies. At the micro level, institutions should establish scientifically grounded performance evaluation systems, equitable benefit distribution mechanisms, and robust oversight frameworks. These should cover areas such as the allocation of postgraduate quotas, laboratory infrastructure, research funding, project applications, authorship attribution, and remuneration distribution. At the macro level, universities should adopt a long-term strategic perspective by leveraging the spillover effects of advantageous disciplines to

establish a "green revolving door" mechanism across disciplines, thereby promoting interdisciplinary collaboration [22]. Through this approach, a dynamic talent ecosystem can be cultivated [23], effectively preventing and mitigating internal conflicts among high-level talent.

4.4. Focusing on contract-based evaluation mechanisms to establish a sound high-level talent assessment system

At present, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities commonly exhibit a structural imbalance in their evaluation of high-level talent, characterized by the "six excesses and six deficiencies": an overemphasis on standardized assessments over individualized evaluations; quantitative over qualitative measures; static over dynamic assessments; single-dimensional over comprehensive evaluations; short-term over long-term indicators; and constraint-oriented clauses over incentive-based provisions. To address these challenges, at the theoretical level, it is imperative to construct a full-cycle evaluation model for high-level talent centered on the four key dimensions of "selection, utilization, incentivization, and development" [24]. This model should systematically incorporate six elements: evaluation orientation, evaluation philosophy, evaluation content, evaluation frequency, evaluation monitoring, and evaluation improvement.

At the practical level, local Sino-foreign cooperative universities should, on the one hand, tailor evaluation systems according to institutional type and positioning. This includes developing evaluation orientations aligned with national strategic priorities, adopting a people-centered evaluation philosophy, designing task-driven evaluation content, setting evaluation frequencies that correspond to career development cycles, implementing whole-process evaluation monitoring, and adhering to a developmental approach to evaluation improvement. On the other hand, institutions should accelerate reforms centered on contract-based employment systems, gradually establishing a dynamic evaluation framework in which high-level talent can both enter and exit, positions can be promoted or demoted, and remuneration can be adjusted upward or downward accordingly.

5. Conclusion

In pursuit of "upward development" and the aspiration for "institutional upgrading", local Sino-foreign cooperative universities attach great importance to the recruitment of high-level talent, treating it as a critical strategic resource for institutional expansion and value enhancement. However, in the process of talent recruitment, these institutions are prone to unintended negative effects, including mismatches between recruited talent and key disciplinary priorities, intensified conflicts within high-level talent groups, and the ineffective application of evaluation outcomes. To foster the sound development of high-level talent teams, local universities should refine the development directions of key disciplines to strengthen the alignment between talent and positions; conduct rigorous cost-benefit analyses to mitigate investment risks associated with high-level talent; resolve conflicts of interest between locally cultivated and externally recruited talent to prevent inefficient resource allocation; and focus on contract-based systems to establish a well-functioning mechanism for both the entry and exit of high-level talent. These measures will provide effective guidance for the development of high-level talent systems in local Sino-foreign cooperative universities.

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