Available Online: 25 November 2026 DOI: 10.54254/3049-7248/2026.39566

Innovative cross-disciplinary talent cultivation for China–Africa cooperation: a case study of the African regional and country studies micro-major at Zhejiang Normal University

*Qiaowen Zhang, Xinli Li**

Institute of African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: lixinli@zjnu.edu.cn

Abstract. As China-Africa cooperation shifts from traditional trade to industrial capacity cooperation and full value-chain operations, there is a growing demand for Africa-savvy professionals who combine regional expertise, specialized skills, and cross-cultural competence. However, Chinese universities have long struggled to meet this need under rigid, single-discipline training models. Addressing this gap, this study explores how Chinese higher education institutions innovate cross-disciplinary talent cultivation through a case study of the undergraduate experimental class and subsequent micro-major in African Regional and Country Studies at Zhejiang Normal University. Drawing on theoretical foundations of interdisciplinary education, the paper examines key structural challenges, including disciplinary barriers, curriculum supply, faculty structure, and practical training, and analyzes the micro-major's innovations in positioning, curriculum design, teaching organization, and collaborative platforms. The study argues that integrating African regional knowledge into specialized learning, embedding language training into field practice, and aligning classroom instruction with industrial demand provide a sustainable pathway for cultivating composite talent. This Chinese university case offers a transferable reference for peer institutions seeking to advance area-studies education and support China-Africa cooperation.

Keywords: regional and country studies, micro-major, cross-disciplinary talent cultivation, China–Africa cooperation, practice-oriented education

1. Introduction

China–Africa cooperation is undergoing a historic transition toward deeper and broader engagement. The Beijing Action Plan of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (2025–2027), adopted at the 2024 Beijing Summit, elevated the overall positioning of China–Africa relations to a new chapter of all-weather community with a shared future and made systematic arrangements for partnership actions toward modernization, and

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identified talent cultivation and capacity building as a key pillar of bilateral cooperation[1]. Around the summit, mechanisms such as the China–Africa Talent Development Cooperation Plan and the China–Africa 100 Universities Cooperation Plan were successively launched, markedly increasing the strategic weight of educational cooperation in bilateral relations[2]. As cooperation moves from trade to industrial capacity cooperation and from single engineering projects to full value-chain operations, Chinese enterprises and institutions operating in Africa are no longer satisfied with Chinese university graduates who master only one language or one discipline, but expect professionals who can assess African conditions, understand industry operations, and handle cross-border coordination. Consequently, China's domestic shortage of interdisciplinary, Africa-savvy talent has widened rapidly, making it an urgent priority for Chinese higher education institutions to innovate their Africa-focused talent cultivation models.

In response, China has introduced a series of institutional arrangements at the national level. In 2022, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council and the Ministry of Education issued the catalog of disciplines and specialties for postgraduate education, listing Regional and Country Studies as a first-level discipline under the interdisciplinary category, which provided an institutional basis for systematic cultivation[3]. In 2023, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs jointly launched a special program for cultivating urgently needed high-level talent in Regional and Country Studies, selecting universities nationwide to undertake cultivation tasks[4]. In 2025, the Ministry of Education deployed the "Double Thousand" plan to enhance graduates' employability, planning to build 1,000 micro-majors (or specialized course clusters) and 1,000 vocational skills training courses, which further released a reform signal for the micro-major as a teaching organization[5]. Liu in reviewing the intellectual history of Chinese Regional and Country Studies, pointed out that this discipline grew out of China's practice of responding to world changes and advancing foreign cooperation, and that its scholarly tradition and orientation differ from the Cold War knowledge system of the West [1]. Liu further emphasized that Regional and Country Studies is a discipline of practice that must be forged in the field, and that its knowledge production should be grounded in field investigation and real social needs rather than armchair speculation [2]. With macro strategy, disciplinary institutions, and industrial demand converging, innovating the Africa-savvy talent cultivation model is both urgent in practice and well grounded academically, which makes the early exploration of a local university exemplary.

Compared with the rapid changes on the demand side, the adjustment on the supply side lags noticeably. Traditional single-discipline models can hardly integrate regional knowledge, professional competence and cross-cultural literacy into one training chain. The adjustment cycle of the specialty catalog is long and costly, making it difficult to respond in time to capability gaps on the industry front line, even where universities offer Africa-related courses or supplement knowledge through minor programs, such efforts often remain fragmented for lack of systematic curriculum articulation and credit recognition. This leads to the research

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1 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation. Beijing Action Plan of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (2025–2027). (2024-09-05). https://www.mfa.gov.cn.

2 China–Africa Talent Development Cooperation Plan. (2023-08-24). https://www.gov.cn.

3 Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council, Ministry of Education. Catalog of Disciplines and Specialties for Postgraduate Education (2022). Beijing, 2022.

4 Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Notice on Implementing the Special Program for Cultivating Urgently Needed High-Level Talents in Area Studies. Beijing, 2023.

5 Ministry of Education. Notice on Deploying the Implementation of the "Double Thousand" Plan for Enhancing College Students' Employability. Beijing, 2025.

questions of this paper: within the existing disciplinary institutions, can local universities find a lightweight and flexible teaching organization that embeds Regional and Country Studies knowledge effectively into the training pipelines of various majors, thereby alleviating the structural shortage of composite Africa-savvy talent? More specifically, how should the micro-major be designed, operated and made effective in cultivating Africa-savvy talent, and what constraints remain to be broken?

Answering these questions carries dual significance. Theoretically, existing research on talent cultivation in Regional and Country Studies mainly focuses on discipline building and graduate education, paying insufficient attention to the micro-mechanisms of cross-disciplinary cultivation at the undergraduate level. As an emerging teaching organization, the micro-major has just begun to be discussed in combination with Regional and Country Studies, and this paper can provide empirical evidence and an analytical framework for this intersection. Practically, Zhejiang Normal University, drawing on China's first comprehensive institute of African studies, founded the country's first undergraduate experimental class in African Regional and Country Studies in 2022 and expanded its cultivation philosophy into a university-wide micro-major in 2023. Its exploration offers a valuable reference for peer universities. Against this background, Section 2 defines the core concepts, lays out the theoretical foundations and reviews the relevant literature; Section 3, using ZJNU as the case, analyzes the real-world challenges of Africa-savvy talent cultivation and the practice of the micro-major; Section 4 evaluates the outcomes, identifies the deep-seated challenges and distills pathways for improvement and transferable lessons; and Section 5 concludes with findings and prospects.

2. Theoretical foundations and literature review

2.1. Definition of core concepts

Two concepts need clarifying at the outset. The first is the micro-major, which refers to a cross-disciplinary teaching organization voluntarily established beyond the specialty catalog on the basis of existing disciplinary strengths, which uses a cluster of compact course modules to fill specific competence gaps in addition to the main major, featuring a light credit load, sharp focus, cross-disciplinarity, and flexible combination[6] [3]. Compared with a second degree or a minor, the micro-major leaves students' enrollment and degree status unchanged, lowers the barrier to entry, and shortens the learning path, and is therefore better suited to embedding regional knowledge into diverse training chains. Huang from the perspective of talent cultivation in the digital-intelligence era, summarized five features of the micro-major, they are frontier orientation, dynamic cultivation, disciplinary integration, comprehensive training and flexible study, and at the same time stresses that its essence is to flexibly adapt to rapidly iterating social divisions of labor through cross-disciplinary course combinations without changing the specialty specification [3], a judgment equally applicable to the field of Regional and Country Studies. The second concept is the composite Africa-savvy talent, defined in this paper as a professional who, working on the frontline of China–Africa cooperation, simultaneously possesses the ability to assess African conditions, professional knowledge of specific industries and the competence to handle cross-border coordination. Cultivating such professionals is not merely a matter of adding a foreign language or a regional course, but requires achieving the integration of the regional dimension and the professional dimension at the three levels of knowledge structure, competence structure and value orientation; this competence profile also serves as the yardstick for observing the effectiveness of

[6] Ministry of Education. Notice on Deploying the Implementation of the "Double Thousand" Plan for Enhancing College Students' Employability. Beijing, 2025.

similar explorations at other universities.

2.2. Knowledge production transformation as the foundation of cross-disciplinary cultivation

Higher education is undergoing a transition from disciplinary differentiation to multidisciplinary convergence, the epistemological roots of which can be traced to changes in knowledge production modes. Gibbons et al. proposed the distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production: Mode1 is Traditional knowledge production centered on disciplinary institutions and follows disciplinary norms of accumulation and certification, while Mode 2 is new knowledge production unfolds in contexts of application, stressing interdisciplinary collaboration, problem orientation and the participation of multiple stakeholders [4]. Klein systematically reviewed the intellectual history of interdisciplinarity and pointed out that interdisciplinarity is by no means a mere aggregation of disciplinary knowledge but an organic integration of methods, concepts and perspectives around complex objects, whose value lies precisely in handling comprehensive problems beyond the reach of any single discipline [5]. Newell further proposed a theoretical model of interdisciplinary studies, arguing that interdisciplinary research starts from complex problems, forms a more complete understanding by integrating the insights of various disciplines, and feeds such understanding back into each discipline [6]. Repko operationalized the interdisciplinary research process as a cycle of defining the problem, surveying disciplinary perspectives, evaluating conflicts and constructing integration, emphasizing that integration is not mixing knowledge but producing new cognitive structures [7]. The National Research Council, in its report on interdisciplinary research practice, likewise confirmed that the real problems faced by society and industry increasingly cross disciplinary boundaries and that universities must provide students with interdisciplinary training sufficient to cope with complex problems [8].

Since Regional and Country Studies takes the politics, economy, culture and society of a country or region as an integrated object, its knowledge production naturally bears Mode 2 characteristics, and its talent cultivation correspondingly requires students to synthesize multi-disciplinary tools in real problem situations rather than remaining within the knowledge boundaries of a single discipline. At the level of curriculum organization, this transformation carries at least three concrete implications: (1) course units should be arranged according to a problem-oriented rather than a discipline-based logic, with cross-disciplinary modules replacing isolated knowledge points as basic teaching units, (2) teaching should shift from single-disciplinary instructors to multidisciplinary teaching teams with collaborative preparation and team teaching, and (3) learning assessment should move from knowledge recall toward performance evaluation in real problem situations. These three changes together point to a fundamental shift in the philosophy of cultivation and provide theoretical justification for the micro-major's modular combination and supervisory collaboration. This explains why the cultivation of Africa-savvy talent cannot simply follow the mature routines of single-discipline teaching, and why the micro-major, as a cross-disciplinary curriculum organization, is especially well suited to the Africa-related field. Specifically, it preserves the depth of disciplinary knowledge systems while introducing the regional dimension in a modular way, achieving an organic combination of "discipline × region". If such curriculum combination lacks theoretical self-awareness, it may degenerate into a patchwork of courses; grasping the underlying logic of knowledge production transformation is therefore a prerequisite for cross-disciplinary program design.

2.3. Outcome-based education and modular curricula as design principles

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) provides direct guidance for micro-major curriculum design. Spady systematically elaborated this paradigm, arguing that training programs should start from the competences students can ultimately demonstrate, define learning outcomes first, and then work backward to design

curricula and assessment, so that teaching points to observable learning results [9]. The logic of curriculum design thereby shifts from "what the university can offer" to "what the position requires". Africa-related positions make highly specific demands, such as host-country languages, investment environment analysis and cross-cultural negotiation, which fit the modular decomposition of core knowledge into flexible course units that students can select according to their main majors. Relatedly, research on short-cycle, modular micro-credentials offers valuable international insights. For instance, Oliver's study shows that precise competence enhancement can be achieved within limited credits, allowing learners to combine units on demand and apply them immediately [10]. UNESCO's 2022 common definition of micro-credentials frames them as short-cycle proofs of recorded learning outcomes, emphasizing flexibility and inclusiveness for learners [11]. The OECD, through cross-national case studies, pointed out that micro-credentials are becoming an institutional innovation connecting higher education with the labor market [12]. It is worth noting that Wheelahan and Moodie, using Bernstein's coding theory as an analytical framework, offered a more critical analysis of micro-credentials, warning that lightweight learning, if not properly designed in relation to full formal education, may bring risks of knowledge fragmentation and deepened educational stratification [13].

This warning is instructive for micro-major construction. Modularity does not equal fragmentation, and outcome orientation does not mean abandoning the systematic nature of knowledge. Accordingly, maintaining completeness and depth within a lightweight organizational form is one of the core tensions examined in the case analysis of this paper. Operationally, this balance can be achieved through three principles. First, outcome checklists guiding module selection, so that each module points to explicit competence goals. Second, progressive pathways articulating module relationships, so that competencies requiring sustained accumulation, such as language and fieldwork, follow coherent sequences. Third, assessment reform safeguarding integration quality, with cross-module comprehensive performance incorporated into the criteria for the completion certificate. These three principles jointly constitute design constraints for program designers and serve as an important reference for evaluating the operation of the micro-major in Section 4.

2.4. Existing research

Existing studies are reviewed along three lines directly relevant to this topic.

The first line concerns research on talent cultivation in Regional and Country Studies. Liu's series of discussions on the nature of the discipline forms the basic theoretical framework, he demonstrated the tradition and practical orientation of Chinese Regional and Country Studies from an intellectual-historical perspective [1], defines its disciplinary character as a discipline of practice [2], and proposes an overall outline for building Regional and Country Studies with Chinese characteristics, advocating an integrated grasp of discipline construction, teaching and think tank functions, letting research feed teaching and teaching support research [14]. On the paths of disciplinary development, he advocates coordinating discipline construction, talent cultivation and think tank functions and forming disciplinary features in practice rooted in the Chinese context [15]. Regarding local participation, Liu summarized the practical experience of Zhejiang Province in cooperation with Africa, pointing out that local universities can develop differentiated competitiveness by serving the opening-up agenda of their regions [16]. Zhai from the perspective of standardization, proposed the "three-in-one" path of discipline construction, talent cultivation and think tank function for Regional and Country Studies, stressing the need to take the Discipline Introduction and Basic Degree Requirements jointly issued by the state as the guideline and to optimize the mechanism integrating teaching, learning, research and

application[7]. Some scholars further argued that the talent base of the discipline should be consolidated by recruiting and cultivating African scholars and promoting two-way knowledge flows between China and Africa [17]. These studies provide the disciplinary cognitive framework for this paper. The fact that ZJNU established the country's first academic division of African Regional and Country Studies in 2023 and received mainstream media attention[8] also shows that local universities' explorations in building Regional and Country Studies platforms have entered the public domain.

The second line concerns research on micro-major construction. Xia et al., in summarizing the micro-major practices of local universities, pointed out that micro-majors are oriented to market demand and restructure curricula around career development, thus coupling specialties with industries [18]. Wang stressed that course groups should be project-driven and output-oriented, making good use of the "catalyst" of interdisciplinary integration[9]. Huang systematically proposed construction mechanisms and promotion paths for micro-majors at the theoretical level [3]. Ge et al. demonstrated a micro-major teaching model that threads literacy, curriculum, tasks and practice together through a specific course [19]. On the whole, micro-major research draws mainly on engineering and digital-intelligence cases, while focused cases in humanities and social sciences, particularly in the field of foreign and regional studies, remain rare.

The third line concerns research on China–Africa educational cooperation and talent flows. Zou and Wang , based on enterprise surveys, pointed out that China–Africa educational cooperation projects must simultaneously respond to the talent needs of Chinese enterprises going global and the employment aspirations of African locals, and that two-way participation of supply and demand is the key to project sustainability [20]. Wang further discussed the significance of China–Africa cooperation in empowering African youth [21]. The Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027) also lists educational cooperation and talent cultivation as key areas[10], which, together with the policy documents mentioned above, constitutes the latest institutional framework for China–Africa talent cooperation.

Taken together, research on talent cultivation in Regional and Country Studies and research on micro-major construction each have their own bodies of work, but studies that examine disciplinary theory, curriculum organization and the practice of a specific country or region within a single integrated framework remain scarce. By taking the African Regional and Country Studies micro-major as its case, this paper attempts to bridge this gap. It responds to the requirement that Regional and Country Studies be a discipline of practice, and it tests how far the micro-major can apply as an organizational form in area studies. The case thus offers an analytical sample for Africa-savvy talent cultivation, one that combines theoretical grounding with operational details.

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7 Zhai K. The normalization and practice of the "three-in-one" construction path of area studies. Peking University Institute of Area and Country Studies, (2025). https://www.igcu.pku.edu.cn/info/1026/8463.htm.

8 Guangming Daily. Zhejiang Normal University establishes the country's first academic division of African area studies. (2023-12-15). https://news.zjnu.edu.cn/_t430/2023/1215/c8451a455292/page.psp.

9 Wang M Y. Making good use of the "catalyst" of interdisciplinary integration to build micro-majors with high quality. China Education Daily, 2024-10-30.

10 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation. Beijing Action Plan of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (2025–2027). (2024-09-05). https://www.mfa.gov.cn.

3. Case analysis: the african regional and country studies micro-major at ZJNU

3.1. Challenges in cultivating composite Africa-savvy talent

The first challenge comes from the fragmentation of traditional disciplines. Language, economics and international relations programs usually belong to different faculties, each with its own training plan, so students mostly complete their studies within a single discipline and find it hard to integrate language competence, professional knowledge and regional awareness into one knowledge structure. Even when Africa-related topics are touched through minors or electives, the lack of systematic articulation and credit recognition leaves knowledge fragmented and unable to be converted into problem-solving capacity. This separation of language, profession and region clearly mismatches the composite demands of Africa-related industries, bringing the structural contradiction to the fore. In its first cohorts, the experimental class encountered obstacles such as cross-faculty course selection and credit recognition lacking precedent, which raised the cost of cross-disciplinary learning about Africa. From a theoretical perspective, this difficulty is a concrete manifestation of the failure of discipline-based cultivation in the face of comprehensive problems, and a mapping of the unfinished knowledge production transformation onto the cultivation process.

The second challenge lies in curriculum supply. Many Africa-related courses still follow traditional frameworks of regional knowledge instruction, with outdated content and inadequate tracking of changes in African business environments and industrial policies, leaving an evident gap between the rapidly changing African reality and static classroom knowledge. Courses also tend toward homogenization, with different faculties repeatedly offering similar topics and lacking in-depth coverage of specific countries and fields, which narrows students' choices and dulls their sense of learning gain. One underlying cause is that course updating is not routinely linked to frontline practice. Teachers prepare their materials mostly from secondary sources, with little input from field research or industry engagement, so courses struggle to stay current. Homogenization also implies duplicated investment of teaching resources, further eroding supply efficiency; in its early stage the experimental class also saw scattered and uneven content, showing that fragmented supply is not an isolated case but the combined result of structural and institutional factors, and that the remedy must start from the course updating mechanism.

The third challenge lies with the faculty. Teachers in traditional faculties have relatively fixed disciplinary affiliations, few possess both professional backgrounds and rich practical experience of Africa, and cross-disciplinary teaching often requires ad hoc staffing across multiple faculties, which compromises the articulation between courses. A deeper constraint is the assessment mechanism, as promotion and tenure review mostly rests on hallmark achievements within one's own discipline, leaving cross-disciplinary workload often unrecognized, with effort and reward out of balance, so teachers' enthusiasm is hard to sustain. The experimental class has long relied on institute teachers teaching across faculties, whose workload is invisible in the assessment of their home colleges—a faithful illustration of this institutional constraint. The faculty is the hub and also the weakest link of cross-disciplinary cultivation; unless cross-disciplinary teaching is "unshackled" at the institutional level, the stability and depth of cultivation can hardly be ensured, and the resolution of the faculty problem often determines whether a cross-disciplinary project can operate in the long run.

The fourth challenge lies in the practice component. Students need firsthand research and field experience in Africa to form genuine understanding, but the practical segments of most programs are short and shallow, leaving limited opportunities to participate in real project operations. Enterprise participation in cultivation is not yet well established, internship positions and course learning lack institutionalized articulation, an

integrated chain of classroom, training, and enterprise is hard to form, and a platform for students to engage with the frontline challenges of China–Africa cooperation has yet to be built. The experimental class has seen limited quotas for Africa study tours and underdeveloped credit-substitution arrangements with major courses, so the proportion of students able to go is low and participation in practice remains clearly limited. The scarcity of practice resources and the absence of institutional articulation overlap, further constraining the effectiveness of practice-oriented education, and at the same time providing a realistic basis for the micro-major to make institutional arrangements for the practice component.

3.2. Methodology and case selection

This paper adopts a single-case study method and selects the African Regional and Country Studies micro-major of Zhejiang Normal University as the analytical object, for three reasons. First, typicality. As early as 2007, ZJNU carried out organized research with China's first comprehensive institute of African studies, accumulating a sizable faculty and a rich reserve of research on African politics, economy, history, culture and China–Africa relations; in 2022 it founded the country's first undergraduate experimental class in African Regional and Country Studies. In 2023 it was approved for the national special program for urgently needed high-level talents in Regional and Country Studies, being the only local university among the fifteen selected units.[11] So its exploration is representative among peer universities. Second, process completeness. The micro-major has undergone a complete process from elite piloting in the experimental class to university-wide broad-based provision, which facilitates observation of the operating mechanism of idea validation, institutionalization, scale diffusion in cross-disciplinary cultivation. Third, accessibility. The research team can obtain first-hand materials such as training programs, course lists, enrollment data and operation records, so the evidence is relatively credible and complete. Case materials mainly come from the project application and mid-term inspection documents, training programs and course syllabi, academic administration records, and the research team's surveys and interviews; the analysis is organized around the framework of "demand identification, supply design, operational testing". First identifying the functional gaps of Africa-related talent cultivation, then examining the institutional design and actual operation of the micro-major, and finally assessing its outcomes, limitations and transferability.

3.3. Micro-major practice: positioning, curriculum, organization, and collaboration

In terms of positioning, ZJNU defines the relationship between the micro-major and the experimental class as one of continuity in philosophy and expansion in scale: the two share the same disciplinary resources and cultivation philosophy, with the experimental class undertaking elite in-depth validation and the micro-major responsible for university-wide provision. The positioning is threefold, i.e. serving the national strategy by building a reserve of professionals who know both the countries and the industries, serving university-wide education by breaking down faculty barriers so that students of more majors can acquire Africa-related knowledge at lower cost, and serving the disciplinary ecosystem by feeding talent cultivation back into disciplinary construction and knowledge accumulation, forming a mutually supporting pattern of research, teaching and think tank functions. These three points respond to the articulation between national strategy and the university's educational mission, and also demarcate the functional boundary of the micro-major as distinct from general-interest electives.

[11] Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Notice on Implementing the Special Program for Cultivating Urgently Needed High-Level Talents in Area Studies. Beijing, 2023.

In terms of curriculum, around the competence profile of composite Africa-savvy professionals, the micro-major designed a modular cluster of core courses, language courses and practical segments, covering African politics, economy, history, culture, fieldwork methods, academic norms and local languages, organized into modules such as political economy and social development, investment and business practices with Africa, and cross-cultural communication and regional governance, so that students can flexibly select modules according to their main majors and career directions, assembling knowledge and competence as needed.

In terms of enrollment mechanics, cross-faculty credit recognition agreements and course selection guidance are provided in tandem. Specifically, students can directly select courses across faculties and complete modules as integrated blocks, while home faculties recognize micro-major credits so that students need not sacrifice progress in their majors. Within each module, courses are arranged from introductory to advanced levels, with cognition-oriented courses dominant in lower years and practice-oriented courses and fieldwork dominant in upper years, forming a progressive ladder of study. This curriculum system was not built from scratch, but rather carries on the framework pioneered by the experimental class and, after systematic standardization, becomes a module combination open to all students. To support this system, related faculties jointly offer 38 Africa-related courses with supporting textbooks, converting years of research outputs into teachable resources. Currently, the enrolled students come from 17 faculties, the scale reaches about 100 students per year across undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels, and general Africa-related courses reach about 300 student enrollments annually. Together, these efforts complete a shift from elite pilot to broad-based provision and markedly expanding the reach of Africa-related knowledge, turning curriculum resources from a niche experiment into university-wide shared public goods.

In terms of teaching organization, the experimental class established the "seven ones" as its anchor, i.e. taking one core course, reading one set of African texts, writing one country report, conducting one field survey, learning one local language, participating in one research project and completing one study tour, threading classroom learning and competence training together through a checklist-like task chain. The micro-major continues and amplifies this institutional innovation in three ways. First, the experimental class's experience with credit recognition is now written into standing rules on credit management. Students receive a certificate once they earn the required credits, without adding to their degree load or length of study. This substantively lowers the entry barrier. Second, cross-disciplinary supervision teams, composed of full-time institute teachers and backbone teachers from related faculties, provide follow-up guidance for project application, thesis writing and consultancy drafting, combining "teaching" with "mentoring". Third, an open selection mechanism for the whole university, based on voluntary application and faculty review, balances quality and participation.

The value of open selection lies not only in widening participation but also in safeguarding quality through mechanism design. Specifically, voluntary application ensures genuine motivation to learn, while college-level review guarantees a baseline level of competence. Together, this dual mechanism shifts student screening from a single test-score criterion to a comprehensive assessment of motivation, foundation, and potential. This not only allows students of diverse backgrounds to enter this training pathway, but also provides a natural comparative sample for studying the relationship between different disciplinary foundations and the formation of Africa-related competence.

In terms of collaborative education, practice-oriented education occupies a prominent position in both the experimental class and the micro-major, and the organizers always treat "leaving the classroom and entering Africa" as part of cultivation. On one hand, the project links Africa-related enterprises, research think tanks and overseas cooperation bases into an integrated collaborative chain of classroom, training and enterprise, through which students can join field research on Africa-related projects, China–Africa economic activities

and the drafting of consultancy reports during their studies, honing analytical and collaborative competence in real tasks. On the other hand, drawing on the Confucius Institutes, overseas research bases and partner university networks the university has established in Africa, the experimental class led cohort-based field research and study tours, and the micro-major further widens participation on this basis, giving more students place-based learning experiences that the classroom cannot replace, forming a multidimensional understanding of African conditions in real settings and accumulating genuine cross-cultural experience, which lays a cognitive and practical foundation for working on the frontline of China–Africa cooperation and makes practice-based teaching a genuine bridge between the classroom and the field.

4. Outcomes, challenges, and implications

4.1. Assessment of practical outcomes

After about three years of operation, the coordinated cultivation of the experimental class and the micro-major is showing initial results. In the dimension of knowledge and competence, students' cross-disciplinary vision and Africa-related knowledge have expanded notably, some students have produced substantial output in project research, country reports, and consultancy report drafting, and their practical competence has been praised by employers and host organizations. In the dimension of supply scale, the program's reach has extended from a single faculty to 17 faculties university-wide, multi-level participation covering undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students has taken shape, and the combination of specialized study, Africa-related research, language training and research practice has proven workable in practice. In the dimension of institutional output, the course modules, credit recognition rules and organizational procedures provide workable models for peer universities, and the feasibility of the micro-major as a teaching organization has received empirical support in the Africa-related field. It should also be noted that the current assessment still relies on process observation, that long-term data on the first cohorts after entering the workplace are still accumulating, and that the final test of cultivation effectiveness requires a longer period. Relevant conclusions await verification by follow-up tracking studies, which reminds program designers to put evaluation-system development on the reform agenda and to preserve institutional flexibility for later scaling.

4.2. Deep-seated challenges

Measured against the original goals, three deep-seated challenges in actual operation need to be faced squarely. First, a micro-major offers limited credits, while language proficiency and field research ability require massive, sustained accumulation. How to maximize competence depth within this limited credit framework remains unsolved—a tension that echoes the literature's warning about the fragmentation risk of micro-credentials [13], where modularity has to be weighed against systematic coherence. Second, university–enterprise collaboration rests on fragile foundations: enterprises' enthusiasm fluctuates with market conditions, and cooperation mostly takes the form of individual projects rather than stable institutional guarantees, leaving the sustainability of the chain uncertain. Third, faculty and evaluation support fall short. Cross-disciplinary teaching carries limited weight in the existing assessment framework, teachers' sustained enthusiasm tends to decline, and unless the deficiencies of the evaluation system are promptly remedied, course quality and cultivation stability will be affected. The three challenges are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, requiring coordinated measures; piecemeal fixes can hardly bring fundamental improvement.

4.3. Pathways for improvement

To address these challenges, deepening the innovation of the cultivation model can start from three levels. At the mechanism level, cross-disciplinary work such as micro-major teaching and experimental-class supervision should count toward workload accounting and professional-title evaluation. Once this work is recognized institutionally, retaining strong faculty no longer has to depend on individual enthusiasm. At the content level, a curriculum iteration mechanism linked to industry developments in Africa should be established. Specifically, this involves regularly surveying frontline competency requirements in China–Africa cooperation, incorporating new cases and policies into courses in a timely manner, and keeping teaching content aligned with real-world cooperation. Meanwhile, the bottom line of modularity without fragmentation must be upheld by arranging progressive pathways for abilities that require sustained accumulation, such as language and field research. At the collaboration level, industry–education integration should be deepened. Universities and enterprises need to jointly build practice bases, institutionalize the rights and obligations of enterprise participation, expand the channels and scale of Africa study tours, and improve credit substitution between study-tour outcomes and major courses. Collectively, these measures will help forge a sustainable, replicable, and scalable pathway for cross-disciplinary Africa-savvy talent cultivation and provide more mature experience for peer universities nationwide, while accumulating first-hand materials for theoretical research on Africa-savvy talent cultivation.

4.4. Transferable lessons

Placing the ZJNU experience at a more general level, four transferable lessons can be distilled. First, in organizational form, the two-track articulation of experimental-class piloting and micro-major promotion provides a low-risk diffusion path from elite validation to provision at scale for cross-disciplinary cultivation, which avoids the quality risks of blind expansion and shortens the time from demonstration to implementation of institutional innovation. Second, in curriculum supply, the modular course cluster built on accumulated disciplinary strengths can enable the broad provision of regional knowledge without greatly increasing resource input; the conversion mechanism of 38 Africa-related courses and supporting textbooks shows that systematically converting existing research outputs into teaching resources is a strategy generally available to local universities. Third, in collaborative mechanisms, the integration of classroom, training, enterprise, and fieldwork needs to be consolidated through institutional arrangements; seemingly trivial institutional designs such as credit recognition and study-tour credit substitution are precisely the key levers for broadening participation. Fourth, in evaluation reform, the inclusion of cross-disciplinary workload in assessment and recognition is the institutional precondition for ensuring teachers' sustained investment and sustaining the vitality of the project, and is also the decisive variable for whether cross-disciplinary cultivation can move from project-based provision to regular operation.

While rooted in ZJNU's distinctive disciplinary strengths, these four lessons are not exclusive to the university. Other regional universities can adopt and replicate them to varying degrees based on their own regional research and disciplinary advantages. In other words, the scope for cross-disciplinary innovation does not depend on the total amount of resources but on whether existing disciplinary strengths can be converted into curriculum supply and whether scattered cooperation can be consolidated into institutional arrangements; this is precisely the greatest comparative advantage of the lightweight micro-major over traditional discipline-building paths.

5. Conclusion

Taking the African Regional and Country Studies micro-major of Zhejiang Normal University as its case, this paper examines the real-world challenges and innovative practices of cultivating composite Africa-savvy talent along the path of problem identification, theoretical framing, case analysis, outcomes and implications. Three conclusions can be drawn. First, the micro-major is a lightweight cultivation form highly compatible with the disciplinary character of Regional and Country Studies. By integrating regional knowledge, professional competence and cross-cultural literacy at a relatively low institutional cost, it alleviates the failure of discipline-based cultivation in the face of comprehensive problems. Second, its effective operation depends on the articulation of four elements—accumulated disciplinary strength, modular curricula, institutional supply and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Within this framework, the course cluster converts research outputs into teaching resources, credit management and cross-disciplinary supervision provide quality assurance for open enrollment, and industry–education collaboration and research practice convert classroom learning into real competence. Strengthening any single link, however, can hardly replace the overall institutional design. Third, the cultivation of composite Africa-savvy talent still faces structural constraints such as limited credit capacity, fragile university–enterprise collaboration and insufficient evaluation support, which require sustained deepening of reform at the mechanism, content and collaboration levels, with the balance between modularity and systematic coherence as the bottom line of cultivation quality.

This paper is a single-case study whose outcome assessment relies mainly on process observation. Long-term data on the first cohorts after graduation are still accumulating, and the robustness of the conclusions awaits validation by follow-up tracking research. Future research can be extended to multi-case comparisons to examine differentiated paths of universities with different disciplinary strengths and locations, and to conduct empirical tests based on longitudinal data, so as to contribute to the academic discussion of talent cultivation in Regional and Country Studies and to the reform practice of peer universities.

Funding

Zhejiang Provincial Higher Education Teaching Reform Project (JGBA2024113)

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