

CHINA'S MODEL FOR FUTURE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT: FROM OVERSEAS STUDY TO WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

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Summary

The rapid transformation of global labor markets has intensified demand for future skills that extend beyond disciplinary knowledge to include professional communication, intercultural competence, networking capacity, and innovation-oriented thinking. Traditional university-based instruction and fully online learning formats increasingly struggle to cultivate these competencies within authentic professional environments. This article examines China's contemporary model of future skills development through international work-integrated learning, with particular attention to structured internships in European companies.

Adopting a historically grounded perspective, the study traces continuity between early twentieth-century Chinese overseas study initiatives, mid-twentieth-century educational exchanges with the Soviet Union, and today's state-supported international internship programs. These experiences have informed the design of current learning strategies that integrate academic preparation with real-world professional immersion. The article analyses the objectives, institutional infrastructure, and pedagogical logic underpinning China's international internship model, highlighting its emphasis on professional communication, network formation, engagement with European innovation ecosystems, and the cultivation of entrepreneurial and start-up mindsets among young specialists.

As an applied case study, the article presents the China–EU Internship project initiated by AuxBridge, which places young Chinese specialists and university graduates in European companies and R&D teams. The case demonstrates how international internships function as work-integrated learning environments that support future skills development and cross-border knowledge exchange.

Key words: future skills development; work-integrated learning (WIL); China–EU educational collaboration; international internships; transnational professional education.

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1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of global labor markets has fundamentally reshaped expectations regarding graduate preparedness and professional competence. Across sectors, employers increasingly emphasise future skills, understood as a combination of professional communication, intercultural competence, collaborative problem-solving, adaptability, innovation-oriented thinking, and the ability to operate within complex and networked professional environments (*European Commission, 2022*). These competencies extend beyond disciplinary knowledge and are difficult to acquire through traditional university instruction or purely online learning formats alone. In response, higher and professional education systems across Europe have increasingly integrated work experience into educational pathways. In some countries, students are encouraged or formally allowed to work in their profession during their studies (e.g.,

Germany, France, Austria, and Ukraine), while in others professional practice is an obligatory component of degree programs (e.g., Portugal, Spain, Poland, and Italy). Additionally, many systems incorporate postgraduate or induction-based internships as part of professional qualification particularly for teachers and medical professionals (widely used across EU countries and Israel) (*Curto-Reverte, 2025*). Despite these efforts, graduates often still lack sustained exposure to real production processes, organizational cultures, and cross-border professional communication.

Against this background, WIL has emerged as a critical pedagogical approach for bridging the gap between education and employment. By embedding learning within authentic work environments, WIL enables the development of future skills through practice rather than simulation. International internships represent a distinctive form of WIL, as they combine workplace learning with transnational mobility, requiring participants to navigate unfamiliar institutional, linguistic, and cultural contexts while performing real professional tasks (*Di Pietro, 2022*).

This article examines China's model of future skills development through international work-integrated learning, with a focus on structured internships in European companies. China's contemporary approach to professional development of specialists builds on a long historical tradition of overseas learning. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sending promising students abroad for education and work experience was viewed as a strategic tool for national development. These historical experiences continue to shape current policy. But unlike traditional academic mobility, contemporary international internships in China are explicitly oriented toward real work environments, practical problem-solving, and exposure to global innovation ecosystems and are seen as the next step (after "education abroad practices for the Chinese students" in forming the specialists of new formation) (*Lu et al., 2021*). It analyses the objectives, institutional logic, and pedagogical foundations of this model, emphasising professional communication, network formation, familiarity with European organizational cultures, and the cultivation of entrepreneurial mindsets among young specialists. The article as well presents the China–EU Internship project initiated by AuxBridge company led by the author of the article to present the real model of real China–EU educational collaboration and transnational professional education. By combining historical analysis with contemporary practice, the article contributes to discussions on effective pathways for teaching and learning future skills in a globalised and digitally mediated educational landscape.

2. Historical Roots of Overseas Work Experience as an Educational Strategy in China

The practice of sending students and young specialists abroad to acquire professional skills through direct engagement in advanced industrial and organizational environments has deep and continuous historical roots in China. Rather than representing a recent policy innovation, contemporary international internship programs reflect a long-standing educational logic that has evolved in response to changing global conditions over the past century and a half. This historical continuity can be observed through three major phases: passive skill acquisition under semi-colonial industrialisation, proactive state-led overseas training during socialist industrialisation, and strategic talent circulation in the era of globalisation.

In the late Qing and early Republican periods (1870-1920s), China's initial exposure to overseas industrial work experience emerged within a semi-colonial context. Foreign enterprises operating factories, shipyards, railways, and mining facilities in China required locally trained engineers, technicians, and managers capable of operating modern industrial systems. This demand generated a process of "technical localisation," through which China's first generation

of modern industrial workers and technical specialists was formed. Although this early form of overseas-oriented skill acquisition was not driven by an explicit national strategy, it produced a lasting educational insight: direct participation in advanced industrial environments was the most effective way to acquire tacit knowledge (including engineering intuition, workshop management practices) and operational standards that could not be transmitted through textbooks alone (*Chen, 2024*). Programs such as the Qing government's Chinese Educational Mission to the United States (1872–1881), the overseas training of graduates from the Fuzhou Naval Academy in Britain and France, and later the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program (from 1909) institutionalised this learning logic. Graduates of these initiatives played key roles in railway construction, shipbuilding, telecommunications, higher education, and industrial administration, often acting as intermediaries between foreign enterprises and emerging Chinese industrial institutions (*Yang & Zheng, 2025*).

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, overseas work experience became a deliberate and systematic state strategy. Between the 1950s and 1960s, China dispatched approximately 38,000 students, technicians, and factory trainees to socialist countries (mainly USSR, Mongolia and Czechoslovakia). These placements were directly linked to the country's national industrialisation plan and the 156 key industrial projects (*Giorcelli & Li, 2021*). Unlike earlier educational mobility, this phase emphasised full-time, position-based training within operating factories, often lasting one to two years. Chinese trainees were embedded in production lines, design bureaus, and technical departments, learning not only specific technologies but also comprehensive industrial systems, standards, planning methods, quality control procedures, and organizational structures. Upon return, these specialists formed the backbone of China's heavy industry, power generation, machinery manufacturing, and aviation sectors. This period marked China's first fully institutionalised use of overseas work practice as a core educational and professional development mechanism.

Since the late twentieth century, China's overseas learning strategy has entered a new phase characterised by strategic talent circulation rather than one-way learning. As China integrated into global markets, the focus shifted from importing industrial systems to fostering innovation capacity, entrepreneurship, and global professional networks. State-supported programs encouraging overseas study, internships, and work experience have been complemented by policies aimed at attracting returnees with international professional backgrounds. In this phase, overseas work experience is no longer confined to engineering and manufacturing but extends across finance, management, law, scientific research, and high-technology sectors (*Marini & Yang, 2021*). New models (including short-term international internships, flexible cross-border careers, and network-based "virtual circulation") reflect an expanded understanding of learning as continuous, transnational, and embedded in real professional practice. Importantly, the state's role has evolved from direct dispatcher to platform builder and policy facilitator (*Lu et al., 2021*).

Taken together, these historical trajectories demonstrate that China's contemporary promotion of international internships is not an isolated response to current labor market pressures. Instead, it represents the latest evolution of a longstanding educational strategy that consistently views overseas work experience as a critical pathway for acquiring tacit knowledge, professional competence, and global connectivity as well as answers the need of the Chinese labor market in real "young specialists", but not just the "abroad educated graduates". This historical perspective provides essential context for understanding China's current engagement with international work-integrated learning models.

3. Chinese Policy Vision of Overseas Internships: From “Abroad-Educated Graduates” to “Job-Ready Young Specialists”

As in other countries of the world, Chinese policymakers and employers have repeatedly identified a mismatch between formal educational attainment and practical professional readiness among university graduates. While international degrees and study-abroad experiences remain valued, they are no longer sufficient in themselves. Major employers (particularly state-owned enterprises, joint ventures, and internationally oriented private firms) now prioritise candidates who possess verified overseas work experience, familiarity with international workplace norms, and demonstrable participation in real production or R&D processes. In this context, overseas internships start to be positioned in China as a corrective mechanism that transforms academic credentials into applied professional competence. As reflected in national and local talent policy documents, overseas internship/work experience is increasingly treated as a quasi-professional qualification that enhances employability, supports enterprise eligibility for government programs, and aligns individual career trajectories with national industrial priorities (Zhu, 2019).

From a Chinese policy perspective, the primary aims of overseas internship programs can be summarised as follows:

- formation of job-ready professionals where internships are designed to expose participants to real organizational structures, production cycles, compliance regimes, and performance evaluation systems, thereby reducing the adaptation period after entry into the domestic labor market;
- acquisition of tacit professional skills with emphasis placed on communication practices, teamwork, project coordination, and problem-solving within multicultural environments and other competencies that cannot be fully transmitted through classroom or online instructing;
- integration into global professional networks where overseas internships serve as entry points into transnational professional communities, enabling young specialists to build durable networks that later support international cooperation, technology transfer, and market expansion;
- alignment with national development priorities with internships in sectors linked to international trade, advanced manufacturing, innovation ecosystems etc (Xu, 2024).

Unlike market-driven internship mobility common in many countries, China’s approach emphasises institutionalisation and legal clarity. Overseas internships are embedded within a multi-level governance framework involving national ministries, provincial and municipal authorities, universities, and authorised intermediary organisations. Legal and policy documents emphasise obligations, eligibility criteria, contractual arrangements, and post-return integration mechanisms, reflecting a clear intent to treat overseas internships as a regulated component of professional formation, not an informal or purely commercial service (Central Committee, 2021). This policy logic explains why China increasingly seeks structured, verifiable, and employment-oriented internship models, including cooperation with European companies and R&D teams combines with educational programs in local universities. From the Chinese perspective, the value of such internships lies not in foreign exposure per se, but in their capacity to produce specialists who can immediately contribute to domestic industries, international projects, and innovation ecosystems upon return. In this sense, overseas internships function as a transitional institutional space between education and employment that transforms students into professionals and aligns individual skill acquisition with long-term national labor market needs (Ministry of Education, 2019).

4. Support System for Overseas Internships as a Form of Professional Development of Graduates and Young Specialists in PR China

In contemporary China, overseas internship initiatives are governed through a coordinated, multi-agency framework that reflects the integration of education, labor, and innovation policy. The Ministry of Education, primarily via its Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges, is responsible for overarching policy design and the authorisation of international cooperation arrangements. Within this structure, the China Scholarship Council operates as a principal implementing body, overseeing the selection, dispatch, monitoring, and post-completion certification of participants in overseas study, training, and internship schemes. Complementing this educational governance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security manages international professional training exchanges, particularly for young specialists and technical personnel, while the Ministry of Science and Technology supports overseas placements connected to research collaboration and innovation-oriented sectors. In parallel, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission facilitates structured overseas training through the international operations and partner networks of state-owned enterprises. Taken together, these institutions form a cross-sectoral governance arrangement linking education policy with labor market needs and industrial development (*Ministry of education, 2019*).

This governance structure is supported by a network of institutional platforms and formal cooperation mechanisms. Bilateral and multilateral government-to-government agreements in education, science, and technology provide the legal foundation for internship and young professional exchange programs. High-level people-to-people exchange frameworks, including those established with the European Union and individual EU member states, articulate stable channels for program implementation. Universities and research institutions serve as intermediaries by embedding overseas internships within curricula, credit systems, and professional training pathways. In many cases, cooperation extends to foreign companies and R&D organisations, enabling internships to function as work-integrated learning rather than as ad hoc mobility experiences (*The State Council, 2025*). Authorised intermediary organisations operate within this regulated environment, typically in coordination with universities and local authorities, contributing to standardised procedures for placement and supervision.

Beyond institutional coordination, the Chinese system places considerable emphasis on legal clarity, procedural standardisation, and risk management. Official guidelines specify eligibility criteria, application processes, documentation requirements, and behavioural norms for overseas interns. Pre-departure training addresses legal compliance, workplace expectations, cross-cultural communication, and safety considerations, framing internships as formal professional assignments. During the internship period, consular services and overseas Chinese academic associations provide guidance and support, while structured certification and reporting mechanisms enable the formal recognition of internship outcomes within domestic talent evaluation and employment systems (*Marini & Yang, 2021*).

5. Financial Support Mechanisms as a Participation Driver for Overseas Internships

For many Chinese students, new graduates, and early-career specialists, interest in overseas internship programs is shaped not only by expected career returns or as a great bonus on the labor market that start 2027 is expected to become a requirement for job vacancies in big cities of China, but also by the existence of multi-channel financial support arrangements that reduce upfront costs and perceived risk. This matters because a typical EU internship program

(1–2 months) is frequently delivered through an organised provider model (usually guided by a local University) and can cost RMB 30,000 to over RMB 100,000 (€3500 – €12000) in service fees, while internships themselves are often unpaid or offer only minor allowances; participants generally still bear airfare and living expenses. At the state level, short-term overseas internship schemes administered through national bodies can cover substantial portions of living and mobility expenses for eligible candidates. A commonly referenced pathway is the China Scholarship Council short-term study/internship-type programs, which (in relevant categories) may provide a living stipend, round-trip travel, and health insurance. For EU destinations, the monthly stipend is often described in the range of approximately €1,200–€1,500, subject to country-specific cost-of-living rules. Eligibility typically requires formal nomination by a Chinese university or employer, an official invitation from a recognised host institution or company abroad, evidence of strong academic/professional merit, and a return/service commitment after completion. A second national pathway often used for individual internship initiatives is post-completion reimbursement: after returning to China and obtaining formal certification of the internship outcomes, candidates may seek full reimbursement through China Scholarship Council channels or other national “young talent” foundations, depending on program category and documentation requirements (*China Scholarship Council, 2025*).

In parallel with national-level financial support mechanisms, provincial, municipal, and regional governments across China have established complementary incentive programs aimed at encouraging young specialists and university graduates who originate from, or are affiliated with, these localities to participate in overseas internship schemes and, crucially, to return to local labor markets upon completion. These initiatives reflect the decentralised dimension of China’s talent development strategy, whereby subnational authorities tailor support instruments to their specific economic capacities and development priorities. The scale of financial support and the associated eligibility criteria vary considerably across provinces and cities, depending on local fiscal resources and strategic needs. In many cases, local governments define priority sectors, preferred host organisations, and minimum internship durations in line with regional industrial policies and skills shortages. Such differentiation allows local authorities to use overseas internships as targeted tools for talent attraction and retention rather than as uniform mobility incentives. Importantly, these local support measures are designed to be cumulative rather than exclusive. Candidates are typically permitted to combine provincial or municipal subsidies with national-level funding schemes, thereby reducing the individual financial burden and increasing participation among graduates from middle-income backgrounds. This layered approach strengthens the overall effectiveness of the system by aligning national talent objectives with local development goals. Table 1 presents selected examples of provincial and municipal financial support programs for overseas internship participants, illustrating typical funding amounts, eligibility requirements, and policy priorities observed during the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years. Together, these examples demonstrate the breadth and flexibility of local government involvement in supporting international internship participation in China.

In addition to state and local government instruments, enterprise-led programs and financial-institution initiatives play a significant role in enabling Chinese young specialists to participate in overseas internship and training schemes. These mechanisms differ from public subsidies in that they integrate international experience directly into employment-based or credit-based frameworks.

A prominent model is found in state-owned enterprise talent development programs, often referred to as “future leader” or elite trainee schemes. Major central state-owned enterprises (such as State Grid, China National Petroleum Corporation, China Aerospace Science

and Technology Corporation, as well as large state-owned banks including ICBC and Bank of China) operate highly selective management trainee programs. Within these schemes, overseas internships or international rotations are embedded as mandatory stages of professional development. The financial model is comprehensive: participants remain fully employed by the Chinese enterprise, receive their regular salary and benefits, and may also obtain an overseas or hardship allowance. All costs associated with the international assignment, including travel, accommodation, and insurance, are covered by the employer. Access to such programs is conditional upon successful recruitment into the enterprise’s elite trainee track, with overseas placement defined contractually as part of the employment pathway.

Table 1

Provincial and Municipal Financial Support Initiatives for Overseas Internships

Province / City	Program / Instrument	Indicative Support Level	Typical Eligibility Requirements
Shanghai (<i>Shanghai Municipal Education, 2024</i>)	One-time grant for overseas internships	¥10,000 –¥30,000 (€1200-€3500)	Local residency status; offer from Fortune 500 or globally recognised company; documentation of placement
Zhejiang Province (<i>Zhejiang Provincial, 2024</i>)	Overseas Training Program for Young Talents	50–70% of total cost (approx. ¥40,000 –¥80,000) (€4800 – €9600)	Enterprise recommendation; co-funding with employer; alignment with strategic sectors
Guangdong Province, Shenzhen city (<i>Shenzhen Futian District, 2025</i>)	Subsidies for overseas practical training	Up to ¥50,000 (€6000)	Placement in leading high-tech or R&D entity; STEM priority; post-return engagement expected
Jiangsu Province (<i>Jiangsu Provincial Department, 2025</i>)	Government scholarship for short-term overseas training/internships	Approx. ¥40,000–¥60,000 (€4800-€7200)	Strong academic record; reputable host institution; local affiliation; duration of internship 4-6 months
Anhui province, Bengbu City (<i>Bengbu Municipal Bureau, 2025</i>)	Entrepreneurship guarantee loans and support lines for returnees	entrepreneurship guarantee loans and support lines for returnees (80% of the loan will be paid by the government after the candidate returns to work to the city and signs a 5 year contract with the local company/factory, the rest 20% will be recalculated with no loan fee to be returned during 10 years)	Local registration/affiliation; verified returnee status; business/contract compliance and reporting

A comparable model as well exists among large private technology companies, including Huawei, Tencent, Alibaba, and ByteDance. These firms operate global exchange and rotation programs for high-potential new hires and early-career employees. Selected participants are assigned to overseas offices, European R&D centres, or partner companies for fixed periods.

As with state-owned enterprises, employees continue to receive their domestic salary and benefits, while the company assumes responsibility for logistical and financial arrangements (*Shenzhen Municipal People's Government, 2020*). Selection is typically based on exceptional performance during recruitment or early employment, as well as alignment between the employee's skills and the needs of the overseas unit.

Complementing enterprise sponsorship, financial institutions provide credit-based support mechanisms. Policy banks such as the China Development Bank, together with major commercial banks, offer "overseas study and training" loan products. These government-guided loans are designed to finance tuition and living expenses for certified overseas education and training programs, including approved internship schemes. They are characterised by preferential interest rates, deferred repayment periods (often commencing after program completion), and extended repayment terms. Eligibility generally requires formal admission to a recognised program, the provision of a Chinese guarantor (commonly a parent or employer) and evidence of future income prospects (*China Merchants Bank, 2025*).

Taken together, these instruments form a systemic and inclusive support structure. National funding targets top-tier talent, local government grants broaden access, enterprise sponsorship professionalizes overseas experience by embedding it in career trajectories, and dedicated financial products provide a safety net for individual investment in international professional development.

6. B2B Internships: A Paradigm Shift from "We want" to "We make"

In recent years, a new trend has begun to take shape in China–EU professional exchange: the emergence of company-led, business-to-business (B2B) internship models, in which the initiative to host Chinese interns originates from European companies themselves rather than from Chinese universities, public institutions, or recruitment platforms. This development reflects not only changing corporate strategies but also accumulated limitations of more traditional, institutionally mediated internship arrangements.

Historically, as it was already mentioned, internships for Chinese students and graduates in Europe were predominantly organised through formalised, institution-to-institution mechanisms, such as university exchange agreements, government-supported mobility programs, or recruitment platforms acting as intermediaries. While these models provided administrative legitimacy and political endorsement, they increasingly encountered practical difficulties at the implementation level. One persistent challenge was the identification of suitable European companies willing and able to host interns in a meaningful way. Many host organisations were selected based on availability rather than strategic fit, resulting in placements that offered limited exposure to core business processes or innovation activities. A second, closely related issue concerned the quality assurance of internships. Chinese sending institutions and authorities often struggled to verify whether internships abroad actually fulfilled their intended educational and professional objectives. Monitoring mechanisms were frequently limited to formal documentation rather than substantive evaluation of tasks performed, skills acquired, or learning outcomes achieved (*Chen & Gan, 2021*). This problem was compounded by geographical distance and differences in organizational culture, making continuous supervision difficult.

From the perspective of European companies, additional frictions emerged. Many firms acting as internship platforms are fully operational business entities, not educational institutions, and therefore lack experience in designing internships aligned with the expectations of Chinese participants and sending bodies. In numerous cases, companies were uncertain about

what Chinese interns were expected to achieve during their placements, how their performance would be assessed, or how the internship related to the intern's future employability in China (Jin *et al.*, 2020). As a result, internships sometimes devolved into peripheral or observational roles, undermining their value for all parties involved.

These structural mismatches contributed to growing dissatisfaction on both sides and created space for alternative organizational logics. Against this background, company-initiated B2B internship models have gradually emerged as a response to the shortcomings of traditional, highly institutionalised approaches. In this new configuration, European companies take the lead by defining internship positions based on concrete operational, R&D, or market-development needs, particularly in relation to their engagement with China or Asia more broadly. Rather than viewing internships as an externally imposed educational obligation, companies adopting the B2B model treat them as early-stage talent development instruments embedded within their normal business activities. Internship tasks are derived from real projects, and interns are integrated into existing teams with defined responsibilities, timelines, and deliverables (Council of the European Union, 2024). This approach reduces ambiguity regarding expectations and enhances the likelihood that internships contribute tangible value to both the company and the intern.

Importantly, the B2B model also shifts the logic of quality assurance. Since internships are embedded within corporate structures, supervision, feedback, and evaluation follow internal company procedures rather than externally imposed academic criteria. While this does not automatically guarantee educational quality, it does enable clearer accountability and more realistic assessment of professional performance. At the same time, it highlights the need for specialised intermediary actors capable of translating between corporate practices and the educational expectations of Chinese stakeholders, ensuring that internships meet both business and developmental objectives. The rise of company-led internships has been particularly visible among European small and medium-sized enterprises and innovation-oriented firms operating in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, clean technologies, digital services, and applied research (Council of the European Union, 2024). These companies often perceive young Chinese specialists not merely as interns but as potential future employees, partners, or cultural intermediaries for long-term cooperation with the Chinese market. In this sense, internships function as strategic entry points into transnational talent pipelines rather than short-term training exercises.

From the Chinese perspective, this trend aligns with a broader shift away from symbolic international exposure toward verifiable, job-ready professional experience. Company-led internships offer concrete evidence of participation in real European business environments, addressing long-standing concerns about the gap between academic mobility and labor market relevance (Marini & Yang, 2021). However, the model also raises new governance challenges, particularly regarding standardisation, legal clarity, and the alignment of corporate-driven internships with national talent development frameworks as well as the traditional targeting of the Chinese government as to transglobal companies or those that are among the top 100 companies in the world as the platforms for Chinese young specialists' and graduates' internships.

Overall, the emergence of B2B-initiated internship models signals a maturation of China–EU professional exchange, moving from institutionally brokered mobility toward more demand-driven and practice-oriented forms of cooperation. While not without risks, this trend reflects an evolving understanding of internships as instruments of professional integration, corporate strategy, and transnational knowledge circulation, rather than as purely educational appendices.

7. AuxBridge “Chinese Internship in EU” Project: a B2B-Modelled Internship Case Study

An illustrative example of the emerging company-led (B2B) approach to international internships is the “Chinese Internship in EU” Project, launched in 2024 on the initiative of AuxBridge, an international company operating across Israel and global markets, founded and led by the author of this article, in cooperation with the Sino-Abroad High-Tech Achievement Docking and Conversion Center (Tangshan City, Hebei Province, China). At present, the Project has entered the pilot phase in Latvia and Estonia, where it facilitates internships for young specialists from China in the fields of logistics and early childhood education. Further expansion is planned to additional European countries and professional domains. Unlike traditional university-driven or government-brokered mobility schemes, this project was conceived explicitly as a business-initiated and business-oriented model, designed to address structural limitations observed in institutionalised internship frameworks. The starting point of the Project was the recognition that intergovernmental and inter-university mechanisms often face difficulties in identifying suitable European host companies, aligning internship content with real business processes, and ensuring the practical quality of placements. In response, AuxBridge positioned itself as a B2B integrator, operating at the interface between European companies seeking China-oriented talent and Chinese institutions responsible for candidate preparation and academic legitimisation.

The Project’s core objective is the organization of short-term (1–4 months) educational and practical internships for Chinese graduates and young specialists in real, operating companies across EU member states. Importantly, the internships are explicitly defined as non-employment, unpaid, and educational-professional placements, ensuring compliance with EU migration and visa regulations while avoiding substitution of local labor. This legal framing reflects one of the central advantages of the B2B-modelled approach: clarity of roles, responsibilities, and expectations for all participating parties. Structurally, the Project is based on a four-party cooperation model involving

- Chinese university as the recruitment and sending institution;
- AuxBridge as the program provider and coordinator
- host-country university as the formal receiving and academic coordinating institution
- European host company as the site of practical internship.

While universities on both sides provide academic legitimacy and educational framing, the initiative to define internship profiles, tasks, and skill requirements originates from companies, reflecting concrete operational, R&D, or market-development needs.

Within this configuration, AuxBridge plays a central coordinating role. It designs internship structures and learning outcomes, verifies candidate suitability (including language competence and motivation), aligns expectations between Chinese sending institutions and European companies, and prepares documentation required for visa procedures together with host universities. This intermediary function is critical in a B2B context, as it translates corporate project logic into educationally meaningful internship experiences that meet Chinese policy and labor-market expectations. The involvement of the Sino-Abroad High-Tech Achievement Docking and Conversion Center adds a further layer of institutional anchoring on the Chinese side. Based in Tangshan (Hebei Province), the Center contributes expertise in international technology cooperation, industry matching, and policy alignment, ensuring that internships are linked to broader objectives of innovation exchange and applied skills development rather than isolated mobility experiences.

From an analytical perspective, the “Chinese Internship in EU” Project exemplifies how company-led internships can overcome several weaknesses of traditional models. First, host companies are selected not as generic training platforms but as active economic actors with defined China-related interests. Second, internship tasks are embedded in real workflows, reducing the risk of purely observational or symbolic placements. Third, quality assurance is strengthened through corporate supervision combined with academic oversight, rather than relying solely on formal reporting mechanisms. At the same time, the Project highlights the continued importance of hybrid governance. Although initiated by business actors, the model relies on universities for academic coordination and on clearly articulated legal principles to ensure compliance with migration, education, and labor regulations. In this sense, the Project does not replace institutional frameworks but reconfigures them around business-driven demand. Overall, the AuxBridge-led “Chinese Internship in EU” Project represents an early but significant example of a mature B2B internship model, reflecting a broader shift in China–EU professional exchange from institutionally mediated mobility toward demand-driven, practice-oriented talent circulation.

8. Conclusions

Internships in contemporary China are increasingly understood as a practical and institutionally regulated pathway for converting academic qualifications into job-ready professional competence. Rather than serving primarily as markers of international exposure, overseas internships are positioned as mechanisms for acquiring tacit professional skills, familiarity with real organizational processes, and the capacity to operate within transnational professional environments. This understanding reflects both historical continuity in China’s overseas learning strategies and current labor market demands for young specialists with verifiable work experience rather than purely academic credentials. The growing emphasis on international internships has also revealed structural limitations of traditional, highly institutionalised cooperation models based on intergovernmental or inter-university agreements. Persistent difficulties in identifying suitable host companies, monitoring the quality of internship content, and ensuring meaningful participation in core business activities have contributed to a gradual reorientation toward company-led (B2B) internship models. In these arrangements, European companies initiate cooperation based on concrete operational, R&D, or market-related needs, while internships are embedded within real workflows rather than framed as external training exercises.

Looking forward, the development of China–EU internship practices is likely to involve greater flexibility regarding the status and profile of host companies. Although placements in globally ranked corporations remain symbolically attractive, such organisations often demonstrate limited openness toward Chinese internship candidates due to strict intellectual property protection regimes, internal compliance constraints, and heightened reputational and political sensitivities, particularly in the context of evolving China–US relations. As a result, small and medium-sized enterprises, innovation-driven firms, applied research organisations, and sector-specific service providers are increasingly emerging as viable and effective internship platforms. This shift suggests that future China–EU internships will be less oriented toward prestige and more toward practical professional integration, supported by specialised intermediaries capable of aligning corporate interests with educational and regulatory requirements. In this evolving landscape, B2B-modelled internships are likely to play an expanding role in sustaining pragmatic international cooperation, facilitating talent circulation, and supporting future skills development under conditions of global uncertainty.

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