



Approvals processes for Chinese-Foreign Joint institutes and Joint programs

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This document provides an outline of the approval and operation process of CFCRS, to assist providers in navigating their engagement with Chinese stakeholders.

Under the Chinese education system, one formal approach to international education partnerships is through **Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS)**, which can run from preschool education¹ through to higher education. There are two types of CFCRS – **Joint Institutes** and **Joint Programs**.

There are currently more than 10 CFCRS joint institutes and around 150 CFCRS joint programs operating in China with Australian partners, making Australia one of the most popular partners for CFCRS joint ventures.

The approval and operation of CFCRS is managed under the “*Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools*”² (The Regulation), published by the State Council in March 2003³ and the Implementation Measures of this regulation⁴ (The Implementation Measures) published by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2004.

Joint institutes and programs require approval from the relevant Chinese education authority depending on the type of operation and study level. The approving body can range from the local education bureau, provincial education department, provincial people’s government, or the MoE. Applications for approval are made twice a year – in March and September, through the Chinese partner.

Approved CFCRS at tertiary level are published on the MoE’s official website for international Education Affairs Supervision and Management website - often referred to as the “JSJ website” which also includes information on Chinese–foreign cooperatively run education.⁵

Chinese-foreign joint education institutes

The establishment of CFCRS joint institutes is usually separated into two phases – “**preparation for establishment**” and “**formal establishment**”. The application for the first phase requires documents on the institute arrangement, collaborative agreement, and proof of funds.

According to The Regulation, applications for the first phase should be processed by the relevant authority within 45 days. Those that receive approval to become “under preparation for establishment” will have three years to meet operational requirements and apply for “formal establishment”. The institute is not allowed to recruit students during this period.

The application for “formal establishment” requires more detailed documents on the arrangement of joint institute and is then usually processed within 3 to 6 months depending on the type of qualification it offers. If the institute fails to submit an application for “formal establishment” within three years, the application process will need to restart from phase one.

In some cases, a joint institute that can demonstrate exceptional preparedness and meet all requirements outlined in The Regulation may be considered for direct establishment by passing the preparatory phase.

Applications for joint institutes at **undergraduate and above degree levels (Above Degree Levels)** are approved by the MoE. The application is first reviewed by the provincial education department, then vetted by the provincial people’s government, before finally submitting it to the MoE. If approved, the MoE issues a “Permit for CFCRS Joint Institutes” (The Permit).

Applications for joint institutes at **higher vocational/diploma level (Below Degree Levels)** are approved by provincial level peoples’ government. The application is first vetted by the provincial education department then sent off to the provincial people’s government for approval. If approved, the decision is submitted to the MoE for formal registration and the Permit issuance.

Applications for joint institutes that offer **secondary school award education, education training and pre-school education** are approved by the provincial level education department after being vetted by the local education bureau. If approved, the decision is submitted to the MoE for registration and the Permit issuance.

Independent Legal Entity Status

CFCRS joint institutes can be established with or without independent legal entity status.

Having independent legal entity status means the institute is able to sign legally binding agreements in their own right. Those institutes without independent legal entity status will have the Chinese partnering institute signing it on its behalf.

However, it is not common or required for joint institute to have independent legal entity status. In fact, as of 2024, China has approved around 260 Chinese-Foreign joint institutes at Above Degree and Below Degree Levels, with less than twenty of these having independent legal entity status. There is only one joint institute with independent legal entity status with an Australian provider.



Institutes with independent legal entity status are usually larger in scale and would have an independent campus built for the purpose; those without are usually built within or attached to the partnering Chinese institute - also known as the 'campus-on-campus' model.

The approval process and approving authority is the same for institutes with or without independent legal entity status.

Chinese-foreign joint education programs

Applications for joint education programs at **Above Degree Levels** are approved by the MoE. The application is first reviewed by the provincial education department then submitted to the MoE. If approved, the MoE issues an approval document for CFCRS Joint Programs.

Applications for joint education programs at **higher vocational, higher education (non-award), school education, as well as pre-school levels** are approved by the provincial level education department and submitted to the MoE for registration and issuance of the approval document.

Background

In the early phases of CFCRS, which dates to the 1980s, the Chinese government hoped the education joint ventures would bolster China's education capacity and support a skilled workforce for the rapid social and economic development ahead. As a result, most foreign partner institutions involved in these projects were of higher ranking compared to their Chinese counterparts.

From 2000, China further stimulated the growth of CFCRS with clearer regulations in place, signaling the start of a gradual shift from the pursuit of scale to the promotion of quality, including introducing the idea of "**Four One Thirds Rule**"⁶ in 2006. The intention of the rule is to ensure that foreign education partners commit at least one third of the teaching and learning resources to the joint venture.

By early 2010s, China's education authorities had become more sophisticated in their understanding of the role and management of CFCRS, with an emphasis on its ability to provide equitable access to international education at home for Chinese students and contribute to the internationalisation of China's education system. This includes encouraging a greater number of joint ventures which award a foreign Bachelor testamur without the condition of a period of study abroad (referred to as **the "4+0" model**). Students would retain the option to undertake study abroad, but it would not be a requirement of degree conferral.

Articulation Programs

It is important to distinguish between how CFCRS and articulation programs operate in China. Articulation programs are a common form of cooperation between Chinese and foreign education providers. They are not treated as a joint venture under CFCRS, and do not require approval from the Chinese education authorities.

Articulation programs take the form of Chinese students combining study in China and study overseas, with students receiving credit for this study based on credit transfer and articulation



arrangements agreed between the partner institutions. These arrangements vary depending on the participating institutions' own training methods and teaching plans.

Typical articulation programs might be based on "2+2" or "3+1" models, ie where a student spends two years in China and then two years in the foreign partner institution, or three years in China and one year in the partner institution respectively.

Under these articulation programs, the Chinese provider and the foreign provider may work together to develop some form of common curriculum, but the joint educational programs do not involve any systematic introduction of foreign courses and educational resources, and it does not involve a change in tuition for students (students pay tuition to their Chinese institution during their time in China, and to their foreign partner during their overseas study)

Going forward

Understanding the approval process for CFCRS and its difference from other forms of cross-border learning is helpful for Australian providers who are currently engaging in or are looking to engage with China.

Going forward, we anticipate that China will continue to issue guidelines to address emerging issues in CFCRS and making education joint ventures better fit with its development agenda.

For further enquiries, please contact [Education and Research Section](#).

¹ Except at compulsory education level (Year 1-9), as well as education in military, police, politics, and other areas of sensitivity. CFCRS for occupational skills training (non-award) is managed by the Chinese Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and is not covered by this policy update.

² Website of Information on International Education Affairs Supervision and Management, Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China. *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools*. Sept. 2003, www.crs.jsj.edu.cn/news/index/3.

³ The Regulation had two amendments in the past years - First amended in accordance with the Decision of the State Council on Repealing and Amending Certain Administrative Regulations of 18 July 2013. Second amended in accordance with the Decision of the State Council on Amending Certain Administrative Regulations of 2 March 2019.

⁴ Website of Information on International Education Affairs Supervision and Management, Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China. *中华人民共和国中外合作办学条例实施办法 (Implementation Measures of Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools)*. July 2004, www.crs.jsj.edu.cn/news/index/6. (Unofficial English translation of the document: <https://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=3555&CGid=>)

⁵ “中华人民共和国教育部中外合作办学监管工作信息平台（Website of Information on International Education Affairs Supervision and Management）.” Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China, www.crs.jsj.edu.cn/index/sort/1006.

⁶ The Four One Thirds rule states that:

- The introduced foreign units shall account for more than 1/3 of all units for the CFCRS program
- The introduced foreign specialisation core units shall account for more than 1/3 of all core units for the CFCRS program
- The number of the specialisation core units of the responsible teaching staff of the foreign education institution shall account for more than 1/3 of all the units of the CFCRS program
- The academic hours of the responsible teaching staff of the foreign education institution shall account for more than 1/3 of all academic hours of the CFCRS program