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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Main Factors Impacting on The Success of Higher Education Internationalisation in Modern China

Zhang Qiang[1*], Normaliza Abd.Rahim[2]

[1]Faculty of Business, Information & Human Sciences, Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, De Centrum City, Jalan Ikram-Uniten, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia;
Xianyang Vocational and Technical College Tongyi Avenue, Fengxi New Town, Xixian New District, Xi 'an, Shaanxi Province, China.
Email: 704467989@qq.com
[2]Faculty of Business, Information & Human Sciences, Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, De Centrum City, Jalan Ikram-Uniten, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia;
Taylor's University 1, Jln Taylors, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: drnormaliza@gmail.com

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):
Zhang Qiang
(704467989@qq.com)

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ABSTRACT

Higher education internationalisation has become a widespread phenomenon, but the route choice constitutes an important issue. This research intends to evaluate how higher education internalisation is influenced by several factors: the leveraging of globalisation and localisation, inflow and outflow of education resources. After reviewing the theories on the patterns of internationalisation and education flows, telephone interview is conducted with six participants from several universities of Xi'an China, include Xi'an University, Northwest University, Xi'an Jiaotong University. Indicated by interview data, universities show strong inclinations of globalising, because the education shall be oriented towards the future career of the students in a globalised business world. However, the globalisation level is not satisfactory for some students. For example, the international branch campuses could be built to a higher level. This means that the campuses could be funded by the local and foreign universities. In addition, the challenges of leveraging globalisation and localisation include vague standards for leveraging the extents of being localised and globalised, cultural barriers and the conflicting ideas among relevant stakeholders such as the education ministry officials, the principal, professors and students. Demonstrated by interview data, outward flows are exemplified by exchange learning. In order to facilitate inward resource flows, universities in modern China tend to attract international students in various ways: travels to some foreign countries to capture the attention of the audiences there; hire some dealers in foreign countries to seek international students; deliver the most recent documents to some foreign agencies that help students apply for studying abroad.

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by critically evaluating the most recent evidence from the university students of China. Chinese universities can also understand how to improve internationalisation practices.

1. Introduction

Higher education is vital for the current state and future development of a country, so the route choice of higher education internationalisation constitutes an important issue (Cunningham et al., 2024). For sake of building a higher education system with both international elements and Chinese features, practitioners must leverage the localisation and globalisation, inward and outward flow of educational resources (Liu, 2020). These two problems can be incorporated into the core factors influencing higher education internationalisation. In the views of Alhalwaki & Hamdan (2019), internationaising higher education is a process of intercultural dialogue that negotiates for the shared objectives on basis of mutual respect and equality.

1.1. Research objectives

i. To discuss the patterns of internationalization in higher education institutions in modern China;
ii. To analyse the flows of higher education resources in modern China;

2. Literature Review

2.1. Globalisation and localization

From the perspective of Kufaine (2024), globalisation plays a crucial role in transforming higher education services into commodity products that can be traded in the international market. There are some approaches to globalising higher education, such as cooperation on research, exchange field schools, project, partnership, internship, agreement and offshoring programmes (Alhalwaki & Hamdan, 2019). There are three reasons for adopting globalisation of higher education: academic by pursuing education and research capacities; economic by remaining a competitive advantage in international community; political by maintaining international security, spreading respect and understanding about the cultures and religions of other countries.

However, it is not reasonable to merely adopt globalisation of higher education while ignoring the value of localisation. Localisation means implementing higher education systems with Chinese characteristics. Past experience demonstrates that the higher education of China has faced many problems and obstacles during the process of "westernization". It is obvious that some western models cannot adapt to Chinese realities or contexts (Liu, 2020). For example, introducing and promoting the University District System turned out a failure. China is expected to develop dialogue with the outside world, and the outside world shall also respect China, regardless of the education history or the present. Internationalising education means to face, understand and integrate various countries, cultures, characteristics and systems (Alhalwaki & Hamdan, 2019; Xu, 2021). A balanced development of higher education must be sought by negotiating the boundary between globalisation and localisation during the process of internationalising (Cunningham et al., 2024).

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2.2. Inward and outward flows of education resources

Regarding cross-border migration and mobility of education resources, China was more often regarded as "*a sending nation than a receiving nation*" (Xu, 2021). However, international student recruitment has been promoted by the national government for many decades, especially since the turn of the century (China Daily, 2024). In 2008, "those students travelling to China to learn (223,499 people; degree or non-degree students) exceeded the number of those students leaving China to learn abroad (179,800; no matter government-funded or self-funded students) (Wu, 2019). During 2015, China ranked as the third-largest destination nation across the globe for overseas learning (397,635), following the United States (with 886,052 international students) and the United Kingdom (with the number of 435,495) (Wu, 2019). To Certain extent, recruiting international students can be deemed as a symbol of its "outward-oriented" HE internationalisation, with the purpose of enhancing image and "soft power" (Wu, 2019).

Based on the typology of Wu and Zha (2018), interactions of a domestic education system and foreign countries can be defined as "inward-oriented", and "outward-oriented". Inward-oriented means to inwardly diffuse foreign innovations based on HE internationalisation, while "outward-oriented" is an attempt at "spreading" or outwardly diffusing domestic innovations. Here the concept of "innovation" covers the originality in culture, norms, knowledge and higher education models (Zha et al., 2019). Some Chinese students would be sent to other countries based on the programmes of exchange learning, so as to bring foreign innovations back to China (Xinhua News, 2024). Furthermore, China has rich experience of educating international students. After communist revolution occurred in 1949, three phases were covered by the campaign of recruiting international students. Concerning the first phase, before the government initiated "Reform and Opening Up" in 1978, recruiting international students could be an approach to optimising its geopolitical context, thus relieving a bipolar system in the era of "Cold War" (Wu, 2020). The second phases between 1978 and 2008, "those students travelling to China to learn (223,499 people; degree or non-degree students) exceeded the number of those students leaving China to learn abroad (179,800; no matter government-funded or self-funded students) (Wu, 2020). The third phases at present, international student recruitment targets at enhancing soft power, especially in the era of implementing "Belt and Road" Initiative since 2013 (Wu, 2020).

3. Methodology

Qualitative research methods are mainly used for discussion. Regarding instrument choice, in-depth interview is valuable for inspiring participants to deliver diverse and specific messages during interactions and dialogues. However, the method often relies on a small sample size, which increases the risk of involving subjective bias (Bell et al., 2019; Hennink et al., 2020). Since this research needs to dig deeply into the actual situations of higher education internationalization in China, a suitable way is expanding knowledge through let students reflect on their direct experience. Telephone interview is conducted with six participants from several universities of Xi'an China, include Xi'an University, Northwest University, Xi'an Jiaotong University. The location of Xi'an China is shown in the map below (Figure 1). The telephone interview is conducted in the room of the researcher.

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Concerning the samples or participants, the researcher will interview six university students in Xi'an China (who work in student unions or have close attention to education system internationalization of their universities). The participants include three male students and two female ones, being coded as PA (Participant A), PB, PC, PD, PE, PF. During in-depth interview, a relaxed and flexible dialogue can be formed, so that participants freely convey the messages about various aspects of an issue. If university students work in student unions or monitor the trends of higher education internationalization, they can provide useful knowledge about the government attitudes, the level of westernization or outward flows of education resources, etc. The core theories supporting interview questions include globalisation and localisation by Alhalwaki and Hamdan (2019); outward perhaps inward flows of education resources by Wu (2020).

Figure 1: The location of university students being interviewed: Xi'an China



Source: Maps of China (2024)

The procedures of analysis consist of two phases: The first phase is carrying out thematic analysis about interview data to understand higher education internationalisation in modern China. At the second phase, the researcher connects the analysis results with prior theories.

This research will fulfill ethics such as informed consent, anonymous, data confidentiality, no harm to participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants would have clear awareness about the research purpose and the actions to be taken, before showing the intention to give support. Their decision to participate or not can also be manifested by the consent letter. The name of any individual would not be revealed to anybody else. Sensitive questions would be avoided by interview. All data would be kept on Google disk of the university, while the video would not be accessible to anybody else.

4. Results

4.1. Globalisation

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Almost all of PA, PB, PC, PD, PE and PF believe that in the modern China, universities show strong inclinations of globalising, because the education shall be oriented towards the future career of the students in a globalised business world. An example of the evidence supporting above argument is provided by PA: *"Our university focuses more on globalisation than reducing the attention on localisation, as we think that the world becomes more open and interconnected. University education has close association with the future career. Hence the university assumed the mission of preparing students well for the globalised business world."* Close links exist between higher education and career/industry. Furthermore, PC and PE explain that *the universities are inclusive for international students.* They provide support for both academic learning and personal life of international students.

However, the globalisation level is not satisfactory for some students. For example, PF said: *"I think that the international branches could be built to a higher level. This means that the campuses could be funded by the local and foreign universities. "*

4.2. Localisation

PA believed that *"There is not a clear standard or threshold for the extents of being localised and globalised, so that some members of the university feel frustrated to take specific actions. "*PB thought that localisation is attributed to the fact that some domestic students are reluctant to adapt to foreign teaching patterns*".* Based on the ideas of participants A, B and C, the challenges for leveraging localisation level include ambiguous standards for leveraging the extents of being localised and globalised; cultural barriers and the conflicting ideas among relevant stakeholders such as the education ministry officials, the principal, professors and students. PD, PE and PF agreed that a certain level of localisation is still presented, because the majority of target audience is Chinese students. The education landscape shall address their expectations. A portion of Chinese students might not be very fascinated with the textbooks or teaching methods of foreign countries, because they have been accustomed to Chinese ways ever since the kindergarten.

4.3. Outward flows

Outward flows are exemplified by exchange learning. PA, PB and PC agreed that they carry some textbooks and the knowledge about Chinese-style teaching patterns to foreign countries. For example, PB reported *"The exchange learning programme lets our students compete for the chance to study about one year in the collaborative universities of other countries. They also bring some textbooks and the knowledge about our teaching patterns to foreign countries."* Other three participants also believe that higher education internationalisation facilitates the cultural exchange among countries, and let other nations recognise the commitments of China to foster the future generations of talents. For instance, PF provided the following evidence: *"The university sends some professors and a few students to study and learn in foreign universities for a short period of time every year. These professors and students will then return to our university at the end of the assignment. During their stay overseas, these professors and students can share some of our teaching philosophies and materials with the foreign professors as well as students."*

However, PE argued that "*Furthermore, the quotas for students and professors with exchange learning can be expanded. At present, only about two students or two professors have the chance within a given period. In future, the number can perhaps grow by two*

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times." Therefore, a pity is that the quotas for students and professors with exchange learning should be expanded. At present, only about two students or two professors have the chance of being assigned to foreign universities within a given period. A possible reason is that huge capital and additional support are required for sending a member of the university abroad. The universities themselves give consideration to cash flow so that a limit is put on the number of assignees.

4.4. Inward flows

In order to facilitate inward resource flows, the universities in modern China tend to attract international students in various ways: collaborative schooling (reported by PA), travels to some foreign countries to capture the attention of the audiences there (PB); hire some dealers in foreign countries to seek international students (the ideas of PC); deliver the most recent documents to some foreign agencies that help students apply for studying in China (PC and PF); start an exchange learning programme, so that the foreign education institutions can become more aware of our brand (PD and PE).

An important reason is enhancing China's national image and promote cultural diplomacy, based on various government-sponsored programmes to provide scholarship for international students (Wu, 2019, 2020). Chinese universities also make institutional efforts to establish "world-class" universities and improve global rankings by increasing the number of registered international students. The ratio of international student to total student enrollment is an important standard of measurement for international rankings. There are also some other "pull factors" such as employment opportunities, the charms of Chinese language and culture, socioeconomic and HE development status.

5. Discussion

Based on interview data, it is believed that in the modern China, universities show strong inclinations of globalising, because the education shall be oriented towards the future career of the students in a globalised business world. Furthermore, the universities are inclusive for international students. They provide support for both academic learning and personal life of international students. However, the globalisation level is not satisfactory for some students. For example, the international branch campuses could be built to a higher level. This means that the campuses could be funded by the local and foreign universities. In addition, the challenges of leveraging globalisation and localisation include vague standards for leveraging the extents of being localised and globalised, cultural barriers and the conflicting ideas among relevant stakeholders such as the education ministry officials, the principal, professors and students. The data results are consistent with opinions of Alhalwaki and Hamdan (2019) as well as Woldegiorgis (2023) who asserted that, it is not reasonable to merely adopt globalisation of higher education while ignoring the value of localisation. The interview results also support the theories of Zhu and Zayim-Kurtay (2019) as well as Liu (2020): localisation means implementing higher education systems with Chinese characteristics. Past experience demonstrates that the higher education of China has faced many problems and obstacles during the process of "westernization". It is obvious that some western models cannot adapt to Chinese realities or contexts (Liu, 2020). Above interview results are contradictory to previous literature, Escriva-Beltran et al. (2019) argued that, China has ranked the top among host countries of IBCs during the past five years, since the Chinese government offered considerable political and financial

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supports. As of January 2017, there were already 32 IBCs in China (Escriva-Beltran et al, 2019).

Demonstrated by interview data, outward flows are exemplified by exchange learning. They bring some textbooks and the knowledge about our teaching patterns to foreign countries. However, a pity is that the quotas for students and professors with exchange learning can be expanded. At present, only about two students or two professors have the chance within a given period. In order to facilitate inward resource flows, universities in modern China tend to attract international students in various ways: travels to some foreign countries to capture the attention of the audiences there; hire some dealers in foreign countries to seek international students; deliver the most recent documents to some foreign agencies that help students apply for studying abroad; start an exchange learning programme, so that the foreign education institutions can become more aware of domestic brands. Such data results also support some theories presented by Wu (2020), Wu and Gong (2021), Laundon et al. (2023). Interactions and exchanges in higher education system would be divided into inward or outward. To be specific, “inward” refers to the attempts at learning from foreign models of higher education, knowledge, culture, and norms. “Outward-oriented” represents the process of exporting domestic models of higher education, knowledge, culture, and norms across the world. In the past thirty years, the internationalization of China higher education has shifted from “inward-oriented” to a more balanced manner. While adopting globalisation schemes, Hayhoe (2018) and Tian et al. (2020) argued that higher education institutions have not ignored the activity of "taking in", but achieved the target to a higher threshold.

6. Conclusion

In the modern China, various universities make great commitments to globalising, because the education is expected to foster the knowledge and skills of students required for future career in a globalised business world. However, concerns are expressed for the limited number of international branch campuses. Moreover, the challenges of leveraging globalisation and localisation include vague standards for leveraging the extents of being localised and globalised, cultural barriers, and the conflicting ideas among relevant stakeholders such as the education ministry officials, the principal, professors and students. Regarding the flows of education resources, outward flows often depend on exchange learning. They bring some textbooks and the knowledge about our teaching patterns to foreign countries. However, the quotas for students and professors with exchange learning should be expanded. For sake of facilitating inward resource flows, universities in modern China adopt several ways to attract international students: travels to some foreign countries to capture the attention of the audiences there; hire some dealers in foreign countries to seek international students; deliver the most recent documents to some foreign agencies that help students apply for studying abroad; start an exchange learning programme, so that the foreign education institutions can become more aware of domestic brands. Above issues and tactics will let Chinese universities become more aware about how to achieve greater success in internationalising their education practices. However, a limitation of this research paper is relying heavily on interviewing six participants from a single city of China. Therefore, future study can interview at least ten participants from different regions, while possibly combining with questionnaire survey.

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Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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