

Internationalization Higher Education for What? An Analysis of National Strategies of Higher Education Internationalization in East Asia

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Abstract

This article examines national strategies on higher education internationalization in three East Asian countries: China, Japan, and South Korea. Specifically, through document analysis of five national educational documents since 2014, it examines what activities of higher education internationalization are underway and, more importantly, how nation states justify them. It finds that the three countries tend to associate internationalization with the countries' global competitiveness and status. In addition, internationalization in the three countries focuses on regional cooperation, justified by its benefits for economic growth and national security. Drawing on the realist perspective in international relations, this article argues that internationalization of higher education at the national level in East Asia is instrumentalized to benefit national economic competitiveness and development and political security, while the important aspect of teaching and learning is overlooked.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education, East Asia, China, Japan, South Korea, national policy

Introduction

Internationalization of higher education has been mapped onto many economic and political benefits for nation-states and incorporated into national strategies (Knight, 2004). However, national contexts differ, as do approaches to internationalization (Buckner, 2019). Yet, most research on

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internationalization of higher education has focused on the institutional and student level; there has been much less study of how internationalization is justified in policy documents and even less from a comparative perspective. This article examines activities in higher education internationalization at the national level and how they are justified in three East Asian countries: China, Japan, and South Korea. These three countries in the same region share common characteristics of strong nation-state shaping of higher education priorities (Marginson, 2011). Therefore, comparing them will contribute to our understanding of higher education internationalization at the national level.

Literature Review

The growing attention of national governments on internationalization has prompted the field to investigate dominant activities and rationales. Rationales are multifold, including economic and political rationales at the national level (Knight, 2004). Economically, internationalization is linked to economic growth and competitiveness; and politically, internationalization is perceived to benefit national security, peace, and political power (Knight, 2004). For example, internationalization in South Korea in the 1980s focused on building national capacity in human resources training (Byun & Kim, 2011) and is linked to economic competitiveness. Moreover, China's higher education engagement in Southeast Asia is seen to be part of its soft power policy in the region (Yang, 2012). Yet, there is little research that empirically analyzes how internationalization is justified in national documents from a comparative perspective. This article intends to fill this gap in the literature.

Conceptual Framework

I draw on the realist perspective in international relations (McKinlay & Little, 1986) to conceptualize the justifications of internationalization. The realist perspective sees the world shaped by relationships between nation states, which pursue their own interests (McKinlay & Little, 1986). From this perspective, internationalization is an instrument for nation-states to pursue benefits such as national competitiveness, economic growth, and national security and stability (Knight, 2004).

Methods

The data of this article comes from documents retrieved from the websites of national ministries of education in China, Japan, and South Korea. The criteria for inclusion are: 1) the documents are the most recent available; and 2) the documents contain descriptions of ongoing national-level activities on internationalization. The search was conducted in English for Japan and South Korea and in Chinese for China due to the author's linguistic abilities. The initial search identified the following documents: 2016 Education Action in the Belt and Road Initiative and Educational Modernization Strategy 2035 in China; 2014-2023 Top Global University Japan Project and 2014 Guideline for Building International Joint Diploma Programs in Japan; and 2016 Education Policy Plan in South Korea. It is possible that more recent documents are available in Japanese and Korean. This is a limitation of this article. The next step of this research is to identify more documents in either English or local languages. I conduct document analysis (Bowen, 2009) to identify and categorize how internationalization is discussed and justified. The analysis shows two themes.

Findings

Global Competitiveness and Leadership

Internationalization is connected to the competitiveness of the country as a global leader in education. For example, the Top Global University Project in Japan explicitly mentions enhancing the competitiveness of Japanese higher education. The criteria for competitiveness are quantitative indicators, such as the percentage of international faculty and students and foreign language classes.

Similarly, in the Educational Modernization 2035 Strategy, China stresses that its global influence has improved. Overall, China's goal is to increase international cooperation by focusing on degree mutual recognition, promoting international students studying in China, enhancing cooperation with international organizations such as UNESCO, and building Chinese branch campuses overseas. These specific goals are discussed in the context of China's goal to increase global competitiveness.

In South Korea, internationalization is linked to the status of the country as a global leader in education in its 2016 Education Policy Plan. “Lead” is a recurring word in the plan, which is linked to leading global citizenship education in developing countries and sharing Korean experience with the rest of the world.

Regional Cooperation for Economic Development, Peace, Security, and Community

Another finding is the regional focus of higher education internationalization and its multi-faceted goals. Frequently, internationalization is seen to contribute to regional economic development, security and peace, and the Asian community.

For example, the 2014 Guideline for Building International Joint Diploma Programs in Japan explicitly mentions that joint degree programs contribute to mutually beneficial relations and regional peace. Similarly, in the 2016 Education Policy Plan, Korea emphasizes exchanges and recognition of degrees among universities in Korea, Japan and China for the benefits of establishing East Asia Education Community. China’s 2016 Education Action in the Belt and Road Initiative include people mobility, research partnerships, foreign languages, and joint academic programs. These programs are perceived to contribute to social and economic development in the region. Regional peace is frequently mentioned as the desired outcome of regional cooperation in higher education.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study identifies two major themes of how internationalization of higher education is discussed in East Asia. The first relates to how nation-states in East Asia position themselves globally. The three countries emphasize their global competitiveness as nation-states and their positions as global leaders in education. The focus on status and competitiveness reflects nation-states’ interests to gain the advantage over other countries in the world. This can be mapped onto the realist view that internationalization is an instrument to benefit nation-states, and in this case, to help nation-states improve global status and competitiveness.

Secondly, the regional focus tends to stress cooperation as an Asian community as it benefits social and economic development and regional security. Internationalization is clearly linked to economic development. Moreover, the regional focus reflects the political rationales to enhance international relations among sovereign states in a region of historical conflicts, which benefits national security and stability for these three countries. The economic and political justifications reflect the realist view that internationalization is connected to national interests.

It is alarming to see the dominance of economic and political rationales in the analysis. I argue that the emphasis on economic and political benefits of internationalization risk overlooking the important academic purpose of internationalization, such as teaching and learning. However, the number of documents analyzed is limited, so the findings are yet to be comprehensive. Future research must include more documents from East Asia and other regions for comparative analysis.

Author Note

You Zhang is a PhD student in Higher Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She is interested in internationalization of higher education and regionalization of higher education from a comparative perspective. Her research has appeared in *Higher Education*, *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, and *Sustainability*. Email: youzhang.zhang@mail.utoronto.ca. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1253-9786>.

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