

Internationalization at Home: A Sustainable Model for Chinese Higher Education in the Post-pandemic Era

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Abstract

Internationalization at Home (IaH) has become a hot research topic although it is not a new concept appeared recently especially in China. The concept of IaH has experienced several changes since it was created in 1990s while the widely used one refers to the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments. The recent development of the concept pays more attention on the establishment of international communities for each individual included. China changed its strict pandemic prevention and control policy in the end of 2022 and moved forward into the post-pandemic era. The practice of IaH has already appeared in China since the reform and opening-up policy carried out in 1978. However, the focus of Chinese policy and practice changed from international mobility to Internationalization at Home with a long-term development. The pandemic fastens this changing process. Due to the theoretical and practical background, IaH is recognized as the sustainable mode for Chinese higher education in the post-pandemic era which represents the future development path.

Keywords: Internationalization at Home, higher education, China, sustainability

1. Introduction

Facing the profound changes and challenges in the Post-Pandemic era, researchers all over the world works hard to search for a theoretical direction and a pragmatism method for the globalization of higher education (Li & Xue, 2023). Governments and universities also make great effort in exploring feasible measures to keep the contact with overseas partners and provide world-leading education resources on campus since cross-border mobility of faculty and students are hampered unprecedentedly during the pandemic (Cai, 2021). Therefore, Internationalization at Home (IaH) has become a hot research topic although it is not a new concept appeared recently especially in China. The following questions are raised under the above background. First, is there a widely accepted concept for Internationalization at Home? How is the development of the concept since it was created in 1990s and the world has changed a lot since then? Second, how about the development of Internationalization of Higher Education in China before the Covid-19 Pandemic? Has Internationalization at Home become the developing trend before 2019? Third, is Internationalization at home recognized as a sustainable mode during and post Pandemic in China? If it is, what are the reasons and the evidences from the government and universities' perspective? The following parts of this article are designed to answer these questions.

2. Concept of Internationalization at Home

Internationalization at home referred to “any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student mobility” when Bengt J. Nilsson, a Sweden Professor and the vice-rector for International Affairs at Malmö University, proposed this concept first at the European Association for International Education (EAIE) in its report in the 1990s (Nilsson, 1999, 2003). This concept is seen as a response to the dominant understanding of equating internationalization with student mobility (Crowther et al., 2001) but is still a very simple concept focusing on activities without exploring the deeper meaning. Furthermore, it focuses on what Internationalization at Home is not, rather than what is really is. Jane Knight defines internationalization of higher education as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily

teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004) and then divides internationalization of higher education into two pillars including “at home” and “cross broader” (Knight, 2006). She proposes that Internationalization at Home comprises activities that help students develop international understanding and intercultural skills (Knight, 2006), emphasizes on campus-based strategies including more details as “the intercultural and international dimension in the teaching and learning process, research, extracurricular activities, relationships with local cultural and ethnic community groups, as well as the integration of foreign students and scholars into campus life and activities” which attach more attention to the development of a more interconnected and culturally diverse campus for students and faculty without leaving the country where their university is based in. Knight’s definition is criticized by other researchers for undervaluing the fundamental role of curriculum in Internationalization at Home since she only mentions the internationalization of curriculum as a related factor rather than the heart of the concept (Beelen et al., 2015). The new concept accepted by most researchers recently is known as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” aiming to develop international and intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes for all students without taking part in mobility programs (Beelen et al., 2015). This definition equates Internationalization at Home as a subset of Internationalization of Curriculum (IoC) excluding student mobility across borders. In 2021, researchers propose a new definition focusing on the utilization of local resources and creation of international communities at home where everyone (mainly students and staff members) is included rather than limiting it to IoC, quotes as “IaH is about intentionally making the most of the knowledge and experience of diverse student and staff members to enhance the curriculum, make learning global and at the same time create international communities at home where everyone is included” (Manning & Col Aiaco, 2021, p. 8).

3. Internationalization of Higher Education in China Before the Covid-19 Pandemic

After the foundation of People’s Republic of China in 1949, Internationalization of Higher Education in China was paid limited attention for nearly 30 years as an initial exploration stage, and experienced a tortuous development (Cai et al., 2020). A return to internationalization happened in 1978 when Chinese government confirmed the “reform and opening-up” as fundamental state policy. The Internationalization of Higher Education focused on cross-broader higher education with student and faculty mobility from 1978 to 1994. As China joined WTO in 2002, Joint Venture and offshore education were paid more attention by Chinese government and universities. These two cooperation methods can be considered both as global campus establishment which is an important way to promote Internationalization at Home (Liu et al., 2022).

3.1 Student and Faculty Mobility from 1978 to 1994

3.1.1 Student Mobility (1978–1994)

In 1978 Deng Xiaoping, the leader of Chinese Communist Party, made a decision to send tens of thousands of Chinese students abroad to study natural science. In 1985, the government authorized the universities to implement international education and academic exchanges with self-financing fund and directed education to modernization, to the world and to the future. Gong and Zhao (1987) assert that the trend of Internationalization of Higher Education (IHE) in China is irreversible and proposes four methods of IHE as reform in universities with international dimension, sending students abroad, international cooperation in research, and transnational universities co-held by two universities from different countries. In 1980s and 90s, Chinese higher education experienced recovery and opening-up while the internationalization focused on sending students abroad. The Notice on Several Problems about Improving and Strengthening the Work on Overseas Chinese Students and Staff issued by National Education Committee (NEC) regulated the principle, management, nomination and priorities of outbound academic study. Together with this notice, the establishment of China Scholarship Council (CSC) in 1996 provided flexibility and support for outbound academic studies accepting fund not only provided by the state government but also from foreign individuals, enterprises, communities and other organizations (Statute of CSC, 1999). Meanwhile, Chinese government proposed positive policies encouraging inbound studies with the issuance of the Notice on Providing Short-term Chinese Language Training for Foreign Students in Universities in 1980 and the Circular on Recruiting Self-Financed Foreign Students in 1989 by NEC.

Chinese government then provide more freedom for student mobility as Deng said in January 1992, “I hope all those who have gone abroad to study will come back, regardless of their political attitudes in the past, they can come back and make proper arrangements. This policy cannot be changed” (Deng, 1993, p. 378). This is adopted in the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Issues Concerning the Establishment of Socialist Market Economy System in 1993 and formed the general policy of studying abroad for Chinese students as “support studying abroad, encourage returning to China, and students free to return or

not”.

3.1.2 Faculty Mobility (1978–1994)

Apart from sending students abroad and accepting foreign students, Chinese government and universities also adopted a liberal attitude towards the mobility of faculty who are recognized as talented people. The first circular issued by MoE to support Chinese universities to invite foreign scientists and experts in technology in 1978 marked the initiation of faculty mobility. Decision on Bringing in Foreign Intelligence for Constructing Four Modernizations (Modernization of Industry, Agriculture, National Defense and Scientific Technology) was initiated by the state council in 1983 which promoted the inbound mobility of foreign faculty and the outbound training of Chinese faculty. Outline of China’s Education Reform and Development issued by the State Council in 1993 promoted the joint training of talented people and research collaboration with foreign universities, and the programs teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

3.2 Joint Venture and Offshore Education from 1995 to 2019

Joint Venture and Offshore Education both requires integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum for all students studying in the joint university or offshore campus. This quality is included in the concept Internationalization at Home as mentioned above. Joint Venture aims to introduce the faculty, administrative group and teaching resources to create international communities in China while Offshore Education, which is also known as Running School abroad in Chinese legal documents, works on the international integration on campus located outside China.

3.2.1 Joint Venture in Higher Education (1995–2019)

Temporary Regulation on Chinese-Foreign Joint Venture in Education issued by National Education Commission in 1995 marked the start-up of Joint Venture and Joint Program in higher education in China and recognized Joint Venture as a way to promote the development of Chinese education and the international exchange and cooperation. However, the attitude of Chinese government is conservative at the beginning in late 1990s. The cooperative area is limited mainly to vocational education without compulsory education from primary school to junior school included due to the same temporary regulation issued in 1995. Great Changes happened with China’s accession to WTO in December 2001 when China promised to open education service market and allow foreign education institutions to participate into education service trade in China. State council then promulgated the Regulation on Chinese-Foreign Joint Venture in Education which is the first administrative regulation made by the state council in this area under the reform and open-up policy. MoE expanded the Joint Venture cooperation area from vocational education to higher education in its annual work highlights in 2002. Joint program in higher education is also regulated by the same regulation as a typical case of internationalization at home. With the prior approval from MoE, Joint Venture and joint program has experienced fast development for around 10 years and seen the improvement of assessment and regulation rules. Currently the Joint Venture and joint program in higher education has to meet the requirements of four “1/3” principle focusing on the international cooperation between two universities in developing a new curriculum. The first 1/3 means that the introduced courses from foreign universities should account for more than 1/3 of the total courses, the second 1/3 refers to the introduced core courses which should also account for more than 1/3 of the total core courses, the third 1/3 is about the proportion of the number of the courses taught by foreign faculty, and the fourth 1/3 relates to the scale of the number of the academic hours taught by foreign faculty. The Circular on Strengthening Quality Assurance of Chinese-Foreign Joint Venture issued by MoE in 2013 improved the quality assurance system in China and the exit mechanism. 234 Joint Venture and joint program in education are terminated due to the decision of MoE without publicize the detailed reason which might be the low quality or the termination of partnership (Zhan & Zheng, 2022). The policy objectives focus on the introduction of high-quality foreign educational resources into higher education in China which bring in international vision for local students and faculty on campus without going abroad.

3.2.2 Offshore Education (1995–2019)

The “211 Project” launched in 1995 and the “985 Project” launched in 1999 promoted the rapid development of higher education in China with more financial support to the selected universities in the two projects. Offshore education became an option for high-quality universities in the vision to enhance worldwide reputation and deep cooperation with foreign universities. MoE issued the Interim Measures for the Administration of Running Overseas Schools of Higher Education which is the first Chinese regulation on offshore education systematically confirming its concept, forms and procedures including prior approval from MoE in 2002 (Guo, 2022). Offshore education seems to be another side of a coin comparing to Joint Venture in China providing foreign students with the international curriculum and communities in their home country. However, Knight (2012) classifies

offshore education into crossborder education. The confusion and misunderstanding (Knight, 2007) caused in this definition can be explained in the Opinions on Promoting Open-up of Education in the New Era issued by MoE and other ministries, recognizing offshore education of Chinese universities and vocational colleges as a countermeasure to help Chinese corporate to go abroad. This is to provide local people with international curriculum at home without sending them to China for training. Decision of the Ministry of Education on Abolishing and Amending issued by MoE in 2015 abolished the Interim Measures in 2002 and then universities and colleges were not forced to get prior approval when providing offshore education service (Guo, 2022). Confucius Institutes and courses are open by Chinese universities and colleges cooperating with foreign universities in 158 countries and regions as an important way to promote Chinese language and culture around the world by the end of September 2019 (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021).

4. Internationalization at Home as a Sustainable Mode During and Post Pandemic in China

Due to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic and the political and economic challenges worldwide in the recent years, the international cooperation between Chinese universities and foreign higher education institutions is facing unprecedented difficulties. Many Studies made by Chinese researchers and scholars from 2020 to 2022 concentrated on this kind of difficulties and problems (Li & Eryong, 2022). Internationalization at Home has just entered the embryonic state in China (Liu et al., 2022) which can be considered as the solution to the current challenges faced by Internationalization of Higher Education (Liu et al., 2021). China has a great foundation for Internationalization at Home due to the continuous support for Joint Venture and joint programs in higher education and the teaching and learning of English as a second language from primary school. After the pandemic broke out in 2020, Chinese universities turned to online and virtue education quickly and began to promote internationalization in the new era following the national policy of open-up in higher education. The 5 conditions favor the development of Internationalization at Home in China are listed by Zhang and Liu (2017): a. there are lots of international scholars coming to China to teach, research, attend academic conferences and cultural activities; b. there are lots of international students studying in China; c. some universities already open some international programs recognized globally; d. the internationalization of many universities is greatly improving since a batch of excellent international teaching material and courses have been introduced and internet technology has been utilized; e. more high-level international academic conferences are held in China.

Due to the concept of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), sustainability is recognized as the balance among economically viable, environmentally responsible and socially equitable (Elkington, 1997). Internationalization at Home is considered to be a good way to achieve the balance because it is economically viable with reduction of the financial costs for students and universities, environmentally responsible with the training of global citizens seeing environmental issues as the cooperation priority for human society to reach a consensus, and socially equitable with the establishment and expand of international communities at home where everyone is included (Woicolesco et al., 2022). This works well in China during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic ear.

Moreover, International mobility can only benefit a small number of students since most students do not have the chance to visit abroad during their study or go abroad for degree program due to the limits of financial support and other restrictions. However, it is believed that the most distinctive feature of internationalization of higher education lies in its effort to ensure all students, including those who cannot go abroad physically, in the universities to receive international education and cross-cultural influence (Cai, 2021). Top Chinese universities has already move to the development of Internationalization at Home since it provides a feasible way to benefit all students. For example, Tsinghua University launched its “2020 plan” in 2017 with the main purpose to enhance Chinese and foreign students and faculty’s experience of Internationalization at Home. Chinese government also realizes the importance of Internationalization at Home since the spread of Covid-19 pandemic fastens the process. MoE authorized the Joint Venture and joint program in Chinese universities to recruit students who cannot go aboard for study although they have received the offer from foreign universities. In order to apply for more quota recruiting the top part of those students, universities with joint programs made great effort to improve the international learning and living experience on campus cooperating with the foreign home universities of those students.

In the end of 2022, China’s pandemic prevention and control measures changed a lot due to the new situation of Covid-19 epidemic including the gradual control of the pandemic and the global use of vaccines. This change marked the start-up of the post-pandemic period in China. However, during the pandemic, MOOCs and online teaching platforms have developed rapidly, and therefore distance education has already been enhanced from an auxiliary teaching method to a main teaching method (Guo, 2022). Distance education is not a simple way to move the offline classes online but a totally different way with innovation and research needed to develop attractive classes and effective tutoring after class. The temporary emergency state of online teaching shifts to

the integration of online and offline teaching in the post-epidemic period to develop internationalization at home as a new model (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Therefore, online teaching will continuously be an important part of Internationalization at Home in China.

5. Conclusion

China's policy and practice about Internationalization at Home improved a lot during the past years. Internationalization of universities has been paid attention in China by the government and universities based on the fundamental national policy of opening-up since 1978. The practice of Internationalization at Home has been promoted mainly through Joint Venture and joint programs in China and offshore campuses since 1995. The concept of Internationalization at Home is widely introduced in China since the 2010s hand in hand with the Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021). During the covid-19 pandemic, online teaching, virtual courses, and distance education became the main methods for internationalization of universities which are also the typical ways of Internationalization at Home. Joint Venture and joint educational programs also play an important role in this time period as another significant way of Internationalization at Home. From a TBL perspective, Internationalization at Home fulfills the requirements of sustainable internationalization with economic, social and environmental benefits. As a sustainable mode for Chinese government and universities to follow the opening-up national policy and settle the problems and challenges during and post the pandemic era due to the policy, practice and literature review from 2020 to 2022, Internationalization at Home also represents the future development path of Internationalization of Chinese higher education.

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