

Internationalisation of Higher Education of China and its Tendency Towards Westernisation

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ABSTRACT

The education system is considered to be vital to the growth of a country. The education system of China has a significant advantage over that of other countries. After the economic reform, the country opened its doors to internationalisation. Thus, it prioritised policy strategically for the higher education of the Chinese people. However, a review article on the higher education international collaboration of China conducted a critical evaluation of the internationalisation of the education system. The article was written by Guo et al. (2021), who emphasised the experience of students in internationalisation at home. In addition, the article explored how undergraduate Chinese students interpret and experience internationalisation in a world-class university in China. The data were gathered from the China North University by considering policy documents, conducting semistructured interviews and visiting the site. A sample of 11 students was considered to evaluate the perceived internationalisation and Western culture in the curriculum. However, findings revealed that based on the perceptions of the students, internationalisation was equal to Westernisation. The students also perceived the significant dominance of English as a medium of instruction and faced challenges owing to the language barrier. The students were unable to understand and learn English, as most of them were Chinese. The study also showed that universities do not give students equal opportunities to study abroad, and only students who belong to the elite class can internationalise themselves. The review article also investigated the unidirectional orientation of internationalisation between China and the Western world.

Keywords: China; higher education; internationalisation; internationalisation at home; westernisation

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education played an important role in creating awareness among students. Many countries underwent changes in their education system simultaneously to expand and modernise it. China has a long tradition of respect for education and the largest education system in the world (Price, 2017). Substantial pressure is placed on students by society and their family to do well academically, which had a significant impact on the reformation of the education system at various levels throughout history. China's education depends on the category of the true religion of the people and places emphasis on learning. China's education system is based on nine years of compulsory education, divided into six years of primary education and three years of junior middle education. In addition, higher education institutions in China are currently pumping out around 8 million graduates on yearly basis. This number is more than the number of graduates in the United States and India combined. In terms of internationalisation, in the past 40 years, China's higher education experienced immense growth (Naughton, 2017). In the late 1970s, Chinese higher education introduced the national strategy of internationalisation to modernise the country's education system.

In accordance with internationalisation, higher education in China depends on three fundamental forms, which is, studying abroad, integrating internationalisation into teaching and learning in university and formulating transnational programmes in Chinese universities

in collaboration with overseas institutional partners. A review of the chosen article shows that internationalisation is considered to be a prior strategic policy of Chinese higher education institutions to become world-class universities (Song, 2018). The chosen article explored how undergraduate students from prestigious Chinese universities interpret and experience internationalisation. Owing to the dominant presence of the Western world, knowledge from Western societies was systematically embraced by schools and universities and integrated into their curricula and official ideology. Thus, the selected research article investigated the unidirectional orientation of internationalisation between China and the developed Western world. This review critically evaluates the selected article ‘Internationalisation of Chinese Higher Education: Is it Westernization?’ to provide significance to the higher education system of China.

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF SELECTED ARTICLE

INTERNATIONALISATION

Over the past three decades, higher education institutions, specifically, universities, were influenced strongly by the dimensions of internationalisation and transnational partnerships to move across national boundaries (Alsharari, 2018). Regardless of the increasing use of internationalisation in higher education, confusion about what actually matters exists. Some scholars argued that internationalisation can increase student and faculty mobility academically, linkages and partnerships internationally and new programmes and research initiatives for international academics. Meanwhile, other scholars believed that internationalisation is a means for delivering education to other countries through satellite programmes and campuses. The definition of internationalisation in the selected article is presented below:

“It is an intentional process to integrate the dimension of international, intercultural or global into education system. It helps in providing purpose, function and delivery of higher education by enhancing the quality and research for all students and faculties. The process also enables universities to contribute in a meaningful manner in the society (Knight, 2004).”

The article also demonstrated that many scholars consider internationalisation as a reflection of the complex, chaotic and unpredictable nature of education. The basic principle of internationalisation shifted to the neoliberal approach, which is driven by economic motives. Many institutions use international students and activities to generate revenue, such as those in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States (Cantwell, 2019). Over the past few years, the international recruitment of students, their preparation for the competitive global labour market and practice of attracting effective talents for the knowledge economy became significant and the fundamental pillars of the internationalisation of higher education.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF INTERNATIONALISATION AT HOME (IaH)

The chosen article also discussed the concept of IaH, which is defined as the deliberate integration of international and intercultural dimensions into formal and informal curricula for all students. The concept of IaH is considered to be vital in this specific context, as it can provide significance to all the students within the environment domestically. According to the article, IaH depends on factors such as international and intercultural dimensions, collaboration and area of research and foreign language studies (Beelen & Jones, 2015). On the one hand, a formal curriculum consists of a syllabus and activities designed to help students meet the requirements of their programme. On the other hand, an informal curriculum is based on the

different support services and organisation of activities of a university to enhance student learning.

The vast range of research on IaH is concentrated in North American and European states. However, Asian countries paid little attention to this topic, especially China, despite the rapid growth of IaH in such countries. Numerous researchers conducted studies in the context of North America using analytical frameworks and practical models to consider the internationalisation curriculum to pursue IaH in the United States. For example, a study depicted two university administrators from the United Kingdom and Portugal who adopted IaH to improve the global ranking of universities (Robson, Almeida, & Schartner, 2018). The administrators avoided internationalisation to enhance curricula, teaching practices and student experience. However, studies that emphasise students' IaH experience are limited.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

China, as a world-class business education centre, has a long-term vision to invest in this education system to improve people's standard of living and prepare them for the global economy. The country's total expenditure on education was around 5.3 trillion yuan, or approximately 831.3 billion US dollars, in 2020 (Xinhua, 2021). According to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, Chinese students rank among the top students in the OECD programme for international student assessment (PISA). The PISA is a test to evaluate the skills of 15-year-old students in 65 countries, rating their reading, math and science competency (Rahmawati & Retnawati, 2019). China began its economic reform in 1978 by committing to establish improved universities in the country. Thus, internationalisation is considered to be an integral indicator of the world-class creation of universities by increasing China's national competitiveness and international influence. Moreover, the internationalisation of China's higher education system is considered to be unavoidable, as the country has become a global economic giant. At the early phase of 1978, a movement to internationalise students was initiated by focusing primarily on recruiting and selecting students to send abroad, specifically, to the United States and United Kingdom (Guo, Guo, Yochim, & Liu, 2021). This movement to send Chinese students abroad was entirely designed under the supervision of government policies, which decided the purpose, practice and where the students would be sent.

Through a review of the article, it was determined that the Chinese government provided universities support to encourage them to create transnational programmes of articulation in a collaborative manner with international partners to internationalise higher education. Until the early 2000s, a significant gap existed between inbound and outbound students, which led to serious brain drain. Currently, the largest gap in internationalisation exists between China and other countries. According to the OECD, the number of international enrolments in higher education in China increased by 23% in 2017 (Canton, 2021). From the article, it was also found that a significant change occurred in the discourse on China's national policy to internationalise higher education. The article emphasised that internationalisation creates awareness of discourses on Chinese characteristics to promote the Chinese model globally by attracting talents to work in the country. Additionally, in Chinese universities, internationalisation was promoted for talent development, curriculum internationalisation, faculty and student mobility, international research collaboration and cooperation among administrators.

From the article, it was observed that Chinese research universities hired many international professors and designed English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) courses. It was assumed that by acquiring knowledge from such English courses, students may be able to develop their talents and internationalise their vision. However, having knowledge of English did not

encourage students to improve their understanding of internationalisation. Instead of hiring international professors, utilising English textbooks from American universities such as Harvard, MIT and Stanford is more important to Chinese universities. Thus, universities cause confusion among students to differentiate between internationalisation and localised knowledge. The article observed the issue of internationalisation, consisting of regional gaps in China and differences between various types of universities. The article also suggested that different Chinese states attract a large number of international students. By contrast, it was also identified that remote areas such as Qinghai, Ningxia, Guizhou and Shanxi receive only 500 international students annually (Wu & Cassidy, 2020). The critical evaluation also examined the significant impact of internationalisation activities on students in China, who contribute considerably to intercultural competency by participating in such activities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SOCIAL IMAGINARY BY CHARLES TAYLOR

The chosen article considered the social coordination of philosopher Charles Taylor under the social imaginary rubric. Social imaginaries are taken as macro mappings of space in a social and political manner and used to perceive, judge and act in the world. By definition, social imaginary refers to a common understanding that enables an individual to practice and share his/her sense of legitimacy broadly (Alma & Vanheeswijck, 2018). Such deep-seated understanding modes are important to people to imagine their existence in a community. The importance of this theory should not be neglected, as it places emphasis on the need to bring meaning to the close processes of teaching and learning. The model also supports discourse to comprehend human possibilities beyond the system of society. From the perspective of the underlying research, the model is considered to be vital to students who want to internationalise by imagining their social existence of how they can fit in to others' culture. In the article, the Chinese university aligned social global imaginary with the student respondents to account for internationalisation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The selected article chose the case study approach to conduct the research. The methodology was considered, as it can provide significance to the researcher by focusing on a single case, that is, China, to understand its higher education system and international collaboration. The data were collected from China North University (CNU), as a leading university in the country. From the review, it was identified that owing to globalisation, CNU became highly engaged in the internationalisation of higher education. In addition, the research examined the different conditions, opportunities and challenges in the process of internationalisation in China. Document analysis, semistructured interviews and site visits were conducted by the author of the article. Policy documents were also gathered from government and university websites using the qualitative method to analyse international policies and regulations. Although China formulated international education programmes, reviewing the literature extensively to understand the policies, including the outline of China's medium- and long-term plans for educational reform and development, is vital. Interviews were conducted with 11 Chinese undergraduate students from CNU from the Faculty of Education and Science. The students were selected using snowball sampling. Among the students, three were in their third year, six were in their fourth year and one was in second year.

The age of nine of the 11 students was between 20 and 29 years, and the age of the two remaining students was below 20 years. The site visits enabled the author to gather information

by conducting interviews effectively. Moreover, the main focus of the interviews depended on the meaning of internationalisation and how the students perceived the internationalisation content and learning material in their courses as well as the advantages and challenges of EMI courses to understand their perception of and experiences in IaH. To analyse the data, a four-stage process was designed to form new perspectives. However, from the findings, it was interpreted that internationalisation derived from one of the seven major components of CNU, as CNU positioned itself among the leading universities in the country. Thus, it pursued strong relationships with higher-level institutions. CNU utilised different ways to pursue internationalisation, including recruiting Chinese scholars with foreign PhDs, motivating faculty members to enhance connections internationally, collaborating transnationally with foreign universities, developing cooperative programmes and joint degrees, recruiting international students and creating numerous EMI degree programmes.

Furthermore, from the critical evaluation of the article, it was found that about 1,700 students are currently enrolled in EMI programmes. It was also determined that the university promised to provide significant resources and opportunities to local undergraduate Chinese students to participate in international activities. Accordingly, the students from CNU considered internationalisation as an alternative learning option from a limited number of developed countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. The students considered internationalisation as a substitute for Westernisation. Most of the participants had similar points of view when asked about the countries they hoped and were willing to visit to study in the future. Many of the students chose the aforementioned developed countries. The dominance of Western-centred scholarship and internationalisation at CNU acted as a source of knowledge and crucial element in the curriculum. According to another respondent, the Western system was inevitably presented in the curriculum to provide quality education. The CNU students also believed that the knowledge they acquired was natural and scientific. Hence, they were able to retain their valuable connection with their Chinese cultural heritage. At this point, the Chinese students believed that they did not need to study abroad to learn about the superiority of Western cultures.

Through a review of the chosen article, it was identified that the culture of Westernisation was not new to the Chinese students, who have been obsessed with Western culture for a long time. To strengthen China's economy, the internationalisation of higher education should be part of the salvation movement to enable students to gain Western and technological knowledge. The country adopted Western education and administration standards to enhance its academic excellence. Modern universities act as foreign transplants in China. Many of the standards or reforms utilised in Chinese universities for international collaboration were adopted from American experience. In terms of Englishisation and internationalisation, the respondents believed that EMI courses belonged under the formal curriculum, as they were not proficient in English, which created challenges in completing their degree programme. The findings showed that the CNU students were burdened by EMI courses, as they were unable to remember the content of the course, because they could not understand the language, being mostly Chinese. It was highlighted above that the utilisation of EMI enabled CNU to become a leading university. However, in practice, the students were dissatisfied with the use of English in their curriculum, which exerted a significant negative impact on content learning in EMI courses among the Chinese students.

For the students, English plays an integral part in internationalisation. Some of the student respondents believed that English is used as a measure to judge their intelligence. To obtain high IELTS and TOEFL scores to be accepted to a university abroad, English is vital and has a dominant position. Every year, Chinese students exert increased effort, pay high costs and spend considerable amounts of time on such exams. According to the students, the adoption of English in university curricula for internationalisation was not an effective method, as they

were unable to grasp learning contents and enhance the quality of their education. In the article, the third theme was elitisation. Regarding this theme, the participants shared that not everyone had an equal chance to study abroad. Students who belonged to a wealthy family or were able to support themselves financially could apply to internationalisation programmes. Moreover, many of the participants believed that the students who could study abroad were the top students or those selected based on merit. The findings of the study also showed that students from rural areas were unable to study abroad, as being selected in the process of internationalisation was impossible. In addition, inequality exists in contemporary Chinese society. This fact was considered, as not all students have access to internationalisation programmes.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this review of the selected article titled ‘Internationalisation of Chinese Higher Education: Is it Westernization?’ it was determined that after the economic reform, China performed well when it opened its gates to globalisation. The country has the largest education system and number of well-known universities in the world and caters to millions of students every year. The education system of China is supervised by the state-run public education system under the Ministry of Education. In addition, by reviewing the article, it was found that the country has a long tradition of respect for education, as it fostered the development of education throughout history. In terms of Chinese higher education, the national strategy of internationalisation was introduced to modernise the country’s education system. Therefore, from the findings of the article, it can be concluded that the students from CNU perceived the implementation of IaH as equivalent to Westernisation. The students emphasised the problematic change that occurred owing to the unidirectional orientation of internationalisation between China and Western states. Moreover, through interviews with the student participants from CNU, the article showed that the dominance of English is present in formal and informal curricula, which creates challenges for students in communicating and understanding effectively. Thus, the students revealed that internationalisation exerted a significant impact in the country, which equated to advanced Western knowledge. The research article also demonstrated that students lack equal access to internationalisation programmes, as some of the students believed that internationalisation was only for elite students in terms of their socioeconomic class and education. Furthermore, the chosen review article has significant implications in the social imaginary of internationalisation for university administrators and policymakers.

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