

THE CURRENT STATUS OF INTERNATIONALIZATION AT HOME IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: *Internationalization at Home (IaH) has garnered widespread adoption and extensive scrutiny globally. To deepen the understanding of cross-cultural dynamics and operational principles, this study delves into the current status of IaH in China. Drawing from 35 case studies, the research confirms some cross-cultural elements of IaH while uncovering new insights. These include diversifying internal motivations, a promotion strategy that prioritizes the integration of high-quality foreign resources, and the internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) with local features. Since China's IaH is still in its nascent stage and some misconceptions persist, it is not immune to certain inherent limitations, such as the oversight of the original goal of nurturing global citizenship, path dependence on learning from Western countries, and the limited benefit coverage due to the fragmented approach of IoC. However, such shortcomings are not unique to China but are also prevalent in other contexts. Considering IaH as an aspirational goal or a guiding philosophy rather than a static state might be more appropriate. Additionally, China's emphasis on leveraging the strengths of developed countries may suggest a practical IaH pattern for developing countries. When exploring the principles of IaH, it is necessary to fully consider the disparities in developmental paths caused by different levels of higher education development.*

Keywords: *Internationalization of higher education; Internationalization at home; Local internationalization; China*

Introduction

Internationalization at Home (IaH) originated in Europe in the late 1990s (Crowther et al., 2000). Its primary goal was to address the limitations of the traditional international education model, which heavily relied on cross-border mobility. Its aim was to foster global competency among all students, enabling them to better prepare for a world characterized by globalization in their professional and personal lives.

As globalization and in-depth studies progress, IaH is increasingly regarded as the transcendence of the superficial aspects of internationalization primarily defined by personnel mobility. Its focal point lies in deepening the capacity-building dimension of higher education internationalization, enhancing the local internationalization level by integrating international and cross-cultural elements into universities' institutional, teaching, and research processes (Guo, 2023).

Therefore, compared to the traditional internationalization model, which primarily focuses on cross-border mobility, IaH aligns more closely with the fundamental concept of higher education internationalization proposed by Knight (Fang, 2021), that is, "the process of integrating international and cross-cultural dimensions into the purpose, function and teaching of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2003, p.2). In the era of globalization, the increasingly frequent international flow of people,

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money, materials, and information also makes IaH highly feasible with richer international resources (Fang, 2021).

IaH has taken root in Europe, America, Australia, East Asia, South Africa and other countries or regions (Zhang & Liu, 2017; Fang, 2024). However, due to the social history and disparities in resources related to the internationalization of higher education (IoHE), the development status of IaH is not uniformly progressive across various countries or regions. Developed nations and regions like those in Europe and America have benefited from better foundational conditions and an earlier start and thus have achieved relatively higher levels of development. In contrast, compared to early adopters, China started later and still exhibits characteristics of a follower trying to catch up in its developmental path (Fang, 2024). Exploring its experience with IaH can enrich cross-cultural cases of IaH, verify its universal principles, and offer valuable lessons to other developing countries.

However, though research on IaH in China has gradually shifted from theoretical propositions to exploration of pathways and models (Fang & Qian, 2025), limited information is available regarding its current status, which hampers the contributions of IaH practice to the global landscape in this field. Consequently, based on an analysis of 35 Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) covering different natures, types, and levels, this study seeks to address three fundamental questions: What are the driving factors for Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) to start the practice of IaH? What are the main mechanisms promoting it? What are the main practical paths adopted? By studying these cases, the research attempts to discover the cross-cultural universal factors and those with local characteristics in Chinese practice to enrich the pool of cross-cultural IaH cases and derive valuable implications from them.

The Rise and Current Situation of IaH in China

The practice of IaH (在地国际化) in China has a unique context. It was once called “local internationalization” (本土国际化), and the term “local internationalization” emerged relatively earlier. The earliest mention of “local internationalization” was in 2005 (Cao, 2005), and its proposer Cao advocated that through Sino-foreign cooperative higher education, more students could complete their “study abroad” experience in China, thus realizing the localization of international talent development. The term IaH first appeared in 2011 (Hong, 2011). Therefore, examining the practice of IaH in China, we need to consider both the “local internationalization” practice before the emergence of the expression of IaH and the practice under the coexistence of the two expressions later. However, for the convenience of expression, this article collectively refers to them as IaH.

Given that IaH is not a novel concept, the measures associated with it in Chinese HEIs have potentially been in place for an extended period, encompassing the internationalization of the curriculum (IoC), teaching staff, scientific research, and campus (Fang & Qian, 2025). To avoid overgeneralizing the concept, this study confines the research objects to the deliberate practice of IaH. The rationale behind this limitation is that IaH has unique practical principles and demands a relatively high degree of systematic change. It is difficult to truly understand its essence without a conscious, practical mindset. Moreover, examining HEIs that intentionally claim to practice IaH helps uncover the actual status and challenges of IaH within China’s distinctive social and cultural milieu, contributing to cross-cultural research and reflecting on the practical principles within the same context.

Literature research shows that Renmin University of China was the first HEI to begin practicing IaH in 2009 (Hong, 2011). Since then, although this concept has gradually become more widely known to practitioners, its development was slow until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when the number of relevant practice cases suddenly increased (Guo, 2023). As shown in Table 1, among the 35 HEIs that have claimed to start IaH practices, 16 emerged in the four years from 2020 to 2023, accounting for 46% of all cases since 2009, nearly half.

It should be noted that although no more new programs have been found in the literature research since 2024, a new trend of initiating IaH has been found in the field of research. From July

8 to 11, 2024, the author was invited to participate in the research on “The Current Situation and Future Development Suggestions of the Practice of Internationalization at Home in China”, led by the Chinese Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE). The task force visited 5 HEIs in Zhejiang province and Shanghai and held discussions with another 13 HEIs in the two regions. During the research, it was found that the current complex international situation is causing the decline of Chinese students’ enthusiasm for studying abroad. For example, at a Project 211 university, 2019 was the peak year for cross-border study, with 2,296 students going abroad, accounting for 22% of all students on campus. Since then, this level has not been restored, and by 2024, the proportion of students engaged in cross-border study had dropped to only about 7% of the total student population. The proportion of postgraduate students participating in cross-border study is significantly lower. Even in ministries-affiliated universities, which usually have more opportunities for cross-border study, the proportion of postgraduate students going abroad is often only a fraction of that of undergraduate students. For instance, at a well-known Project 985 university, the proportions of undergraduate students participating in overseas study and exchange from 2021 to 2023 were 19%, 19%, and 32%, respectively, while the corresponding proportions for postgraduate students were 6%, 5%, and 6%. This new normal, in turn, raises higher requirements for promoting the internationalization level of domestic higher education. In response to the growing need for students to receive international education at home, more and more HEIs are preparing to implement IaH practices. A nationwide questionnaire survey on IaH, conducted by the author among faculty and administrative staff from August 2023 to June 2024, found that 24.5% of administrative staff (N = 501) and 28.9% of faculty (N = 557) reported that their institutions are actively preparing to implement IaH.

Literature Review

In 1999, Nilsson (2003) put forward the concept of IaH and subsequently defined it as “any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student mobility” (p.31). Paige (2003) expanded on Nilsson’s definition as “the provision by universities of international and intercultural learning opportunities for those students who for various reasons do not participate in study-abroad programs” (p. 52). Beelen and Jones(2015) further specified it as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.” (p. 69).

Knight maintained that the use of “at home” in IaH aims to emphasize campus-based elements (Sierra, 2013). This definition, which is based on the spatial dimension, has been more widely disseminated by her. She divided the Internationalization of Higher Education (IoHE) at the institutional level into two main approaches from a spatial perspective: internationalization abroad and IaH. Specifically, IaH is defined as international activities that occur on the home campus (Knight, 2004).

Although IaH emerged later than internationalization abroad, the phenomenon it represents is not entirely new; rather, it may have existed for a long time in history, as suggested by Zheng et al. (2022). Wächter (2003) also pointed out that “IaH is not an entirely new concept. Instead, it is a rediscovery” (p.6). Beelen (2007) considered “campus internationalization” as the predecessor of IaH. By comparing the relationship between the connotations of IaH and IoHE, Fang (2021) holds that IaH is not an entirely new concept but an emphasis and return to the original meaning of IoHE against the backdrop of the prevalence of cross-border mobility. Nevertheless, researchers generally agree that, regardless of how the novelty of this concept is defined, “This does not at all diminish its importance” (Wächter, 2003, p.6). Moreover, IaH is shifting internationalization from the periphery to the core of HEIs (Wächter, 2003).

Scholars have mentioned several other key components, including extracurricular activities, connections with local cultural and ethnic groups, and initiatives to integrate international students and scholars into campus life (Knight, 2005). Policies and systems, institutional settings, infrastructure, foreign language learning, intercultural or international classrooms, and the application of Information

and Communication Technology (ICT) are also considered important (Crowther et al, 2000; Sierra, 2013; Ramberti & Altbach, 2016). Developing strategic partnerships with foreign institutions (Ramberti & Altbach, 2016), recruiting international students, internationalizing the curriculum and credit certification, and establishing an international higher education quality assurance mechanism are further elements noted by scholars (Teekens, 2007; Knight, 2005; Wen et al., 2023).

Regarding the practice of IaH, there is a consensus that it lacks a standard model, and various social and cultural variables and characteristics of the education system will influence its form (Sierra, 2013). However, scholars also contend that IaH encompasses core elements (Knight, 2005), although currently, there is no definitive and unified understanding of these elements (Sierra, 2013). Some scholars regard IoC as its most crucial tool (Crowther et al., 2000; Jones & Reiffenrath, 2018). The international teaching staff and the active involvement of faculty and staff have been considered key factors in determining the success or failure of IaH (Nilsson, 2003; Childress, 2010; Jones & Reiffenrath, 2018). Brandenburg and Federkeil (2007) posited that international cooperative research is increasingly important and deemed sufficient infrastructure as an essential indicator of the internationalization level of HEIs.

Although researchers hold diverse perspectives regarding the core elements of IaH, it is widely acknowledged that IaH represents a process requiring the active engagement of every member within the institution where it is being implemented (Crowther et al., 2000; Mestenhauser, 2003; Beelen, 2007). Existing studies have provided a reference framework for examining the current situation of IaH in Chinese HEIs.

Some researchers have delved into the practice of IaH within diverse societal and cultural contexts. For instance, Crosby (2009) argued that, given Canada's status as an immigrant nation where ensuring equal respect for all cultures is rather challenging, anti-racism and multiculturalism should underpin the development of IaH in the country. Muñiz & Borg (2022) presented the measures adopted by the United States to promote the practice of IaH by improving admissions and enrollment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Oviedo & Krimphove (2022) introduced the process of the Brazilian Association for International Education promoting IaH through building the "Brazilian Virtual Exchange Program" (Brazil VE). With the rapid increase in the number of international students in Australia, the interaction between international and domestic students has drawn significant attention (Arkoudis et al., 2013). Coincidentally, Jon (2013) also explored realizing IaH in Korean HEIs by facilitating the interaction between domestic and international students. In Japan, due to the impact of the monolingual nature of HEIs' campuses on international rankings and lower levels of English proficiency among the population, English Medium Instruction (EMI) has been prominently emphasized (Garner, 2024). According to Zhuang & Hong (2023), in recent years, Singapore's higher education sector has implemented a series of measures to internationalize the integration of industry and education.

Regarding the practice in China, although Shen (2021) and Yao et al. (2023) have carried out research on the implementation and effects of IaH in Chinese research universities through individual case studies, and Li & Xue (2023) have provided suggestions for the sustainable development of IaH in Chinese HEIs in the post-pandemic era based on interviews, empirical research on the overall IaH practice status in China remains scarce. This has led to limited understanding among both domestic and international academia regarding China's practices, thus impeding China's ability to contribute more to theoretical development in this field. In this context, conducting a more comprehensive study of IaH in China would help enrich cross-cultural cases of IaH and offer valuable insights for other developing countries with similar social and cultural backgrounds.

Methodology

To understand the practices of IaH in China, this paper examines the status based on 35 cases of HEIs that claim to have adopted IaH strategies. These 35 HEIs were selected due to their publicly available data on IaH practices from official websites, academic literature, and media reports. As of

the time of the study, these are the only institutions identified through accessible data sources that explicitly report adopting IaH strategies. Therefore, the findings are confined to this specific group of institutions and cannot be generalized to the entire Chinese higher education system.

This study adheres to a constructivist epistemological stance. From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is not an objective entity waiting for discovery; instead, it is actively constructed by the researcher through data interpretation. During the data collection phase, I interacted actively with the data sources. For instance, when searching for information on official websites, I did not passively accept the presented content. Instead, I critically evaluated it, considering the institutional context, potential biases in self-presentation, and the relationship among different pieces of information. When sifting through academic literature, I looked for directly relevant research and considered how different theoretical frameworks and research methods in the literature shaped the understanding of IaH practices. Regarding media reports, I analyzed the language used, the intended audience, and the possible motives behind the reporting to extract meaningful insights about IaH.

This study follows an inductive rather than deductive logic. Inductive reasoning involves deriving general principles from specific observations, whereas deductive reasoning applies general theories to particular cases. In the context of this research, an inductive approach is more appropriate for two key reasons.

First, IaH in Chinese HEIs is a complex and context-specific phenomenon. By analyzing 35 individual cases, this study captures the unique characteristics and nuances of each institution's practices. A bottom-up approach enables the identification of patterns and themes without being constrained by pre-established theories. For example, by closely examining each case's initiatives, challenges, and achievements, common trends in internal motivations, promotion strategies, and implementation approaches can emerge naturally.

Second, inductive reasoning allows for greater adaptability in studying evolving educational practices. The implementation of IaH is influenced by institutional policies, local culture, and international trends, which continue to change. Unlike deductive logic, which relies on fixed theoretical frameworks, inductive reasoning facilitates a flexible and exploratory approach that responds to new insights as they emerge from the data.

Given these advantages, this study's qualitative research method grounded in inductive reasoning is more appropriate. This approach aligns with a constructivist epistemology. Inspired by other researchers such as Liu (2023, 2024) and Li & Xue (2023), I adopted the thematic analysis method to conduct this research. As Clarke & Braun (2017) described, thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. This method allows for a flexible and detailed examination of data, making it particularly useful for exploring the complexities of educational strategies and practices. Thematic analysis has been widely applied in studies of higher education and internationalization (e.g., Marandure, Hall, & Noreen, 2024; Bengson, 2024), and its data-driven approach aligns with the goals of this study.

Data Collection

I conducted data collection in two stages to establish the database for this study. During the first stage, because the relevant reports on IaH practices mainly appear on the institutions' official websites or in the media, retrieving related materials required using the popular Chinese search engine Baidu. Additionally, to ensure that relevant cases in academic literature were not overlooked, searches were conducted on China's largest academic platform, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and the foreign database platform, Web of Science (WOS). The search was conducted on January 6, 2024. Keywords included “在地国际化” or “本土国际化” on Baidu, “(篇名：在地国际化) OR (篇名：本土国际化)” on CNKI, and “TI=(china) AND TI=(internationalization at home)” on WOS. Due to the difficulty in limiting the positions where keywords appear in Baidu, the search generated over 10 results pages. However, only 78 records turned out to be relevant upon closer examination. The

search results on CNKI yielded 128 records, while WOS returned five. All the literature was regarded as the initial database.

Twenty-eight cases were drawn from the reports on Baidu, and 10 were obtained from academic articles on CNKI. Notably, no relevant findings were uncovered in the literature indexed in WOS. Subsequently, I integrated the information from different channels related to the same institution. Eventually, 35 cases that were deemed suitable for this study emerged.

In the second stage, a detailed scrutiny was conducted on the materials acquired in the first stage. Specifically, cases that had no relevance to the education field and those falling within the basic education stage (K-12) were filtered out. Additionally, given that the Baidu search results often included repetitive reports regarding the same information, efforts were made to eliminate duplicates. Consequently, 38 cases concerning relevant practices in domestic HEIs were obtained. To be more precise, 28 cases were drawn from the reports on Baidu, and 10 were obtained from academic articles on CNKI. Notably, no relevant findings were uncovered in the literature indexed in WOS. Subsequently, I integrated the information from different channels related to the same institution. Eventually, 35 cases that were deemed suitable for this study emerged.

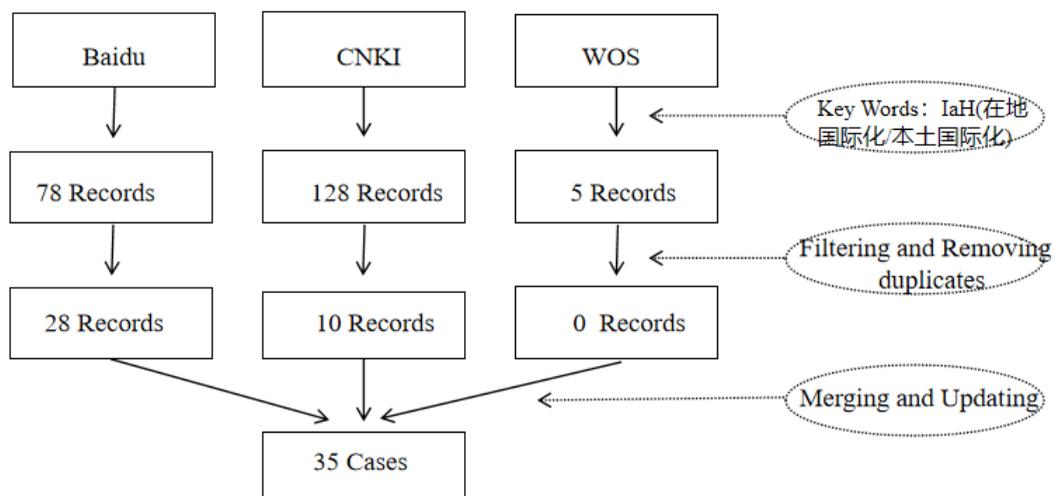


Figure 1: Formation Process of the Case Database

After completing the screening process, I created a document for each case institution. Then, I integrated the relevant information to generate a case text for each HEI. Furthermore, I visited the official websites of these case HEIs and updated 8 cases where new information was available. In the end, 35 case texts, capable of reflecting the latest practice profiles of each institution, were successfully compiled. I numbered the 35 case HEIs from 1 to 35 in the order of the years they appeared.

The case HEIs demonstrate certain differentiation regarding institutional nature, type, and level (as detailed in Table 1). Regarding the nature of institutions, among the 35 cases, public institutions accounted for 86%, while private institutions made up 14%. Regarding institutional types, colleges affiliated with Ministries accounted for 46%, and local institutions comprised the remaining 54%. As for the institution level, “double first-class” institutions constituted 37%, while non-“double first-class” ones accounted for the remaining 63%. A “double first-class” institution refers to HEIs in China that are part of a national initiative to cultivate world-class institutions and disciplines. This initiative was introduced by the Chinese government in 2015 to enhance the international competitiveness of Chinese higher education (Chen et al., 2024).

Table 1: List of Chinese HEIs with IaH Practice

Year	Nature of institutions		Type of institutions		Level of institutions		Total
	Public/ Private (second column)		Ministries-affiliated/ Local (second column)		Double first-class/ Non-double first-class (second column)		
2009	1		1		1		1
2010		1		1		1	1
2011	2		1	1	1	1	2
2012	1		1		1		1
2013	1		1		1		1
2014	1		1		1		1
2017	1		1		1		1
2018	4		3	1	2	2	4
2019	3		2	1	2	1	3
2020	3		1	2		3	3
2021	6	3	4	5	2	7	9
2022	6	1		7	1	6	7
2023	1			1		1	1
Total	30	5	16	19	13	22	35
%	86	14	46	54	37	63	100

Note: I arranged the attributes according to the information provided by the official website of each institution. The year when some universities started internationalization at home (IaH) is based on relevant literature or reports, which may be different from the actual situation.

Data Analysis

During the process, I employed NVivo 12 Plus software to organize data based on word strings to assist with the thematic analysis of the 35 case texts. Considering the previous literature and research questions (Li & Xue, 2023), the analysis comprised three rounds of coding (Liu, 2023, 2024; Li & Xue, 2023), through which I could systematically categorize and analyze the data.

In the first round, I highlighted the salient statements relevant to the research question. Then, I labelled relevant activities, ideas, concepts, and opinions (Li & Xue, 2023). After that, I grouped specific items into initial codes based on common attributes (Liu, 2023). This step generated 391 nodes. During the second round, I focused on these 391 nodes and categorized them into different thematic categories across the cases. As a result of this round of coding, 12 categories were identified. In the third round, I endeavored to merge the previously identified 12 categories into three general themes to make the research presentation more manageable. This was also in line with the appropriate level of generalization in most published journal articles (Liu, 2023). The detailed coding process is presented in Table 2. The number of mentions of each theme in the 35 cases was reported to indicate the weight of the theme, which was expressed as $n/35$ (n out of 35) (Liu, 2024).

While carrying out these steps, I compared the generated categories with the formulations in the existing literature for consistency. At the same time, I remained open to data that did not conform to the existing understanding of the topic (Liu, 2023). This approach ensured that my findings were not only based on a comprehensive coding process but also considered the broader academic context, allowing for a more holistic exploration of the research topic.

Table 2: Examples of the Encoding Process

Raw Data (Excerpt)	1st-round code	2 nd code	3 rd code
N2 In the global work environment, possessing an international perspective and a high level of professional competitiveness is an essential skill for all aspiring professionals.	Address the challenges of the global labor market		
N18 In response to the challenges posed by the epidemic and the complex international situation, our school has adopted a significant strategy in recent years to develop international talent domestically. This strategy involves introducing high-quality international educational resources to provide students with a diverse range of high-quality international curriculum options, thereby enriching the supply of high-quality international educational resources.	Address the challenges of the epidemic and the complex international situation	External motivation	
N22 In the context of the broader trend of internationalizing education, the University of Shanghai Science and Technology has taken significant steps by establishing the Sino-British International College and the Sino-German International College. These initiatives are designed to provide students with access to top-tier engineering education abroad without the need for them to study overseas.	Improve the quality of talent training	Internal motivation factors	Motivation
N17 To delve deeper into the integration and innovation of high-quality foreign curriculum resources with our local educational offerings and to propel the internationalization process in the post-pandemic era,.....	Innovate the international education system and mechanism		

Triangulation was employed in this study to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings and minimize researcher bias. Triangulation refers to using multiple data sources, methods, or researchers to cross-check and confirm the validity of the findings (Kocaman, 2025). Data triangulation was achieved by incorporating information from official websites, academic literature, and media reports. This approach provided a broader, multi-faceted view of IaH practices and allowed for cross-verification of the data, reducing the risk of relying on any one potentially biased source. Additionally, methodological triangulation was employed by combining qualitative analysis of textual data with quantitative aspects, such as counting the frequency of mentions of each theme across the 35 cases. This mixed-method approach enriched the findings, enabling a more nuanced and robust understanding of IaH practices. The triangulation process not only strengthened the validity of the data but also facilitated a deeper exploration of any inconsistencies or contradictions in the findings.

Findings

The qualitative data analysis reveals several key findings in light of the research question regarding the current status of IaH in Chinese HEIs and the factors contributing to its cross-cultural and local dimensions.

The Differentiation of Internal Motivations for IaH in China

The statements of institutions that mentioned the motivation behind IaH in the database indicate that the reasons for initiating IaH can be broadly categorized into external and internal motivations.

Regarding external motivations, the institutions that began implementing IaH earlier primarily focused on addressing the challenges posed by globalization. At the organizational level, these challenges prompted a shift in the perception of the role of higher education, highlighting the significance of its international function. For instance, in 2009, Renmin University of China (N1) introduced the concept of IaH to keep pace with the global trends of international competition and the knowledge economy. The aim was to expand and enrich the international dimension of higher education, just as President Ji of Renmin University stated,

Universities no longer respond only to the demands of their own countries and traditions but also to the new requirements brought about by international competition and the knowledge economy. The students we are facing are already a new generation of young people who have grown up in the era of the globalized economy and the information age, and they have higher expectations for enhancing their international competencies (Mao et al., 2011).

At the individual level, these challenges emphasized enhancing students' international competencies. Take, for example, a private institution (N2), which initiated IaH in 2010. This institution recognized that possessing international perspectives and competitiveness was crucial for all prospective professionals in a global professional environment. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in the international landscape, the sustained development of IoHE, under the constraints of restricted mobility, became a key driving force for IaH. Online collaboration and exchanges with foreign HEIs emerged as the primary means of promoting internationalization, as evidenced by the substantial increase in IaH programs.

It is worth noting that the external motivations driving Chinese case institutions to implement IaH closely align with those propelling universities in Europe, Japan, and other Western countries (Crowther et al., 2000; Nilsson, 2003). This convergence mirrors the influence of global trends, as expounded by Gao (2019), who stated, "Modern universities are facing unprecedented challenges within the globalized context, as they are expected to reform teaching and research to meet twenty-first-century requirements, including fostering students' global citizenship attitudes and intercultural competence and solving issues concerning the international community" (p.273).

However, when considering internal motivations, the original intent underlying IaH in Chinese case institutions exhibits a degree of diversity and distinct local characteristics. Among these motivations, the most frequently mentioned is "enhancement of talent development quality" (6/35), a formulation that cuts across the nature, level, and type of institutions. For instance, A renowned "double-first-class" university (N6) perceives IaH as an innovative approach to nurturing forward-looking, high-calibre talents (Qu & He, 2021). Similarly, a science and technology institution (N24) set out to promote IaH to enhance the quality of engineering talent development. Interestingly, this foundational objective aligns with the assessment made by foreign scholars, who argue that "internationalization at home means that international education is brought into the mainstream of the overall quality of domestic higher education" (Phùng & Phan, 2021, p. 235).

Furthermore, as local access to international education resources continues to expand, there has been an increasing emphasis on innovation within the international education system and strategies, achieved by integrating and utilizing international resources under the umbrella of IaH. For instance, a Normal University (N19) is exploring integrating high-quality foreign course resources with local educational resources via IaH, aiming to facilitate the internationalization process in the post-pandemic era.

There has been notable differentiation in the internal impetus driving IaH across institutions of diverse nature, levels, and types. Some ministries-affiliated and "Double First-Class" institutions (N1, N6, N8, N13, N27) view IaH as a crucial means to facilitate the construction of world-class universities.

In 2022, in the face of new situations, challenges, and tasks, we launched the Global Open Development Strategy 2.0... emphasizing the continuous improvement of the IaH level. The early stage of the proposed IaH concept mainly aimed to enable our students to receive an international education without going abroad. As time has passed, our school believe that the connotation of IaH should be further expanded to introduce world-class international resources to China and to attract international students to receive a world-class education in China. (N6)

In contrast, two local private institutions (N2 and N21) view IaH as a pivotal approach to enhancing their institutional capacity. One of them (N21), in particular, anticipates that IaH will become the most profound and substantial form of international education for bolstering the capacity-building of private HEIs. Remarkably, the nuances of these driving forces have yet to be fully explored in existing domestic or international research. It is significant to recognize that beneath the diverse internal motivations lies a fundamental pursuit of improving the quality of higher education. In pursuit of this objective, introducing prestigious foreign resources and adopting international benchmarks to elevate local educational standards have emerged as prevalent strategies. For a more in-depth analysis, please refer to the subsequent discussion below.

The Promotion Strategies of IaH in China

What are the similarities and differences between the strategies employed by Chinese institutions and those adopted by their foreign counterparts to promote IaH? In other words, what factors contribute to its cross-cultural and local dimensions? This constitutes one of the primary focal points of this study. Referring to the existing literature on the formulations of the elements of the IaH practice, especially the systemic review of the elements of IaH by Sierra (2013), four main initiatives can be found in the case institutions' promotion strategies, namely: Infrastructure construction (6/35), Policies and institutions (17/35), Faculty/staff involvement (4/35), and Leveraging high-quality foreign resources (18/35).

Table 3: The Coding Framework of the Promotion Mechanism of IaH in Case Study Institutions

node	category	theme
Accelerate the platform construction	Infrastructure construction (6/35)	
Provide organizational guarantees		
Carry out top-level design		
Included in the development strategy	Policies and institutions (17/35)	
Strengthen financial support		
Provide institutional guarantees		
Policy tilt		Promotion mechanism
Improve the three-level driving system for international development		
Coordinate the international resources of the whole institution	Faculty/staff involvement (4/35)	
Strengthen cooperation among all sectors within institution		
Pay attention to the engagement of teachers and students		
Deepen cooperation with foreign and other institutions	Leveraging high-quality foreign resources (18/35)	
Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools		
Introduce high-quality oversea education and teaching resources		

Note: sample size is 35.

When comparing the strategies for advancing IaH in Chinese institutions with those described in the literature, the three categories, namely “Infrastructure construction,” “Policies and institutions,” and “Faculty/staff involvement”, align closely with the concepts of “Policies and institutions, institutional arrangements, infrastructure,” (Sierra, 2013) and “Faculty/staff involvement” discussed in existing literature (Nilsson, 2003). Nevertheless, the category of “Leveraging high-quality foreign resources” exhibits a pronounced localization, diverging from the more globally recognized cross-cultural elements typically emphasized by experts in the field (Crowther et al., 2000; Nilsson, 2003; Knight, 2004; Sierra, 2013; Rumbley & Altbach, 2016; Jones & Reiffenrath, 2018).

Several factors influence the existence of particular promotion strategies. One factor is the developmental disparity in higher education between China and developed countries (Qiu et al., 2019). Additionally, the emphasis on facilitating the introduction of high-quality educational resources within China’s higher education development policies also plays a role (Wu, 2021).

Since the initiation of the Reform and Opening Policy in 1978, China has embraced the integration of high-quality international educational resources as a strategy to enhance the calibre of its higher education system. A succession of policies and guidelines has been introduced to facilitate this integration, including the “*Regulations on Sino-foreign Cooperation in Running Schools*” (State Council, 2003), the directive “*On Further Promoting Sino-foreign Cooperative Education*” (MOE, 2006), the policy statement “*On Doing Better in Opening Up Education in the New Era*” (State Council, 2016), “*Announcement of the State Taxation Administration on Clarifying Several Issues Concerning the Administration of Value-Added Tax in Sino-foreign Cooperative Education*” (State Taxation Administration, 2018), and the recent “*On Accelerating and Expanding the Opening Up of Education in the New Era*” (MOE, 2020). These initiatives have spurred significant growth in Sino-foreign cooperative educational endeavours. As a case in point, the landscape of Sino-foreign cooperative education programs has witnessed a marked expansion from 2003 to 2023, with the number of degree programs from undergraduate to doctoral level soaring from 117 to 1056 (Huang, 2023).

Up to now, our international programs have covered nine secondary colleges, with 18 disciplinary programs in 4 major types, including Sino-foreign cooperative education programs, international certificate classes, bilingual classes, and Sino-foreign cooperative education classes. (N2)

At present, nearly half of the majors in our institution have cooperative education programs, and most offer double degrees, covering more than a quarter of the total number of enrolled students. (N21)

The growth of Sino-foreign cooperative education programs reflects China’s increasing importance in leveraging foreign resources for educational improvement. On May 29, 2023, President Xi emphasized that China should effectively utilize world-class educational resources and innovative elements to make China an important world education center with strong influence in constructing an educationally powerful country (Xinhua News Agency, 2023). In the “*Decision of the Communist Party of China Central Committee on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and Promoting Chinese Modernization*”, released at the Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee in 2024, it was also clearly stated that high-level education opening up should be promoted and foreign high-level science and engineering universities were encouraged to establish cooperative education programs in China (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). These initiatives suggest that enhancing high-quality overseas educational resources will increasingly constitute a crucial IaH promotion strategy.

The Approach of IaH in China

The approach to IaH in the case institutions falls into six categories (for details, see Table 4). The level of attention paid to each approach is measured by the number of cases involved, ranked in descending

order as follows: Internationalization of the curriculum (27/35), Faculty internationalization (19/35), Use of ICT (18/35), Foreign language study (8/35), Research internationalization (5/35), and Internationalization of university-industry collaboration (4/35).

Compared with the practice elements discussed in the literature review, it can be observed that all approaches align with the practice elements formulated in the literature. This indirectly validates the cross-cultural universality of certain IaH approaches. The “Internationalization of the curriculum” and “Faculty internationalization,” widely emphasized by scholars both domestically and internationally, have also drawn the most attention in China. “Use of ICT,” and “Internationalization of university-industry collaboration,” regarded as burgeoning trends in literature, are also present in Chinese.

Table 4: Various IaH approaches

approach	Number of Cases	The mentioned approach in literature
Internationalization of the curriculum	27	Crowther et al., 2000; Knight, 2004; Beelen, 2017; Jones & Reiffenrath, 2018
Faculty internationalization	19	Nilsson, 2003; Childress, 2010; Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012; Rumbley & Altbach, 2016; Beelen, 2017; Jones & Reiffenrath, 2018
Use of ICT	18	Sierra, 2013; Rumbley & Altbach, 2016
Foreign language study	8	Nilsson, 2003; Sierra, 2013
Research internationalization	5	Knight, 2004; Brandenburg & Federkeil, 2007
Internationalization of university-industry collaboration	4	Zhuang & Hong, 2023

Note: The sample size is 35.

It is worth noting that although the strategies adopted by Chinese case institutions to promote IaH are consistent with the discourse and practical experiences presented in international literature, implementing the critical pathway of “Internationalization of the Curriculum” exhibits distinctive Chinese features.

“Internationalization of the Curriculum” refers to “the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study” (Leask, 2015, p. 9). According to this definition, the essence of IoC has little to do with the language of instruction. On the contrary, Leask (2009) advocates that an internationalized curriculum should expose students to language diversity. De Wit (2011) even directly points out the misunderstanding of equating education conducted in the English language with internationalization. However, IoC is often regarded as an English Medium of Instruction (EMI) in China. Of the 27 case institutions that mentioned IoC, 11 referred to EMI.

Regarding talent development, the international campus has introduced high-level international teaching staff, drawn on the curriculum systems of renowned foreign universities, and implemented teaching entirely in English(N8).

In 2019, our institution successfully held two sessions of the International Course Week. 85 professors from 55 universities or research institutions, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, and Purdue, offered professional courses taught entirely in English, benefiting more than 3,000 students(N13).

To further promote the level of IaH in our education, our institution took the lead in using advantageous majors such as editing and publishing, communication, and journalism as breakthroughs and launched the “Bilingual or English-taught Course Construction Project”... As of now, the offering rate of bilingual or English-taught courses in journalism and communication is 95%(N16).

The government’s policy orientation somewhat influences the attention paid by the case institutions to EMI. Since the early 2000s, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of China has consistently encouraged HEIs to offer EMI courses through a series of policy documents. As early as 2001, the “Several Opinions on Strengthening Undergraduate Teaching in Higher Education Institutions and Improving Teaching Quality” (关于加强高等学校本科教学工作提高教学质量的若干意见) proposed “actively promoting teaching in foreign languages such as English”, this was followed by additional documents in 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2020 (Zong, 2023). Additionally, in the policies for the “Double First-Class” initiative in China, the provision of EMI courses or programs is also regarded as a key performance indicator of a university’s internationalization level (Chen et al., 2023). Encouraged by these policies, two Project 985 universities (N6 and N8) have adopted entirely EMI-based curricula in their international campuses. In a pilot program at a private university (N16), the proportion of EMI courses has reached 98%.

While the rise of EMI has been a significant trend in Chinese higher education—particularly in research-focused and internationalized universities—there has been a noticeable shift towards prioritizing Chinese language and culture in recent years. This change aligns with President Xi’s emphasis on cultural self-confidence and a more nationalistic approach to education (Li, 2023). As a result, although EMI was initially seen as a key element in the internationalization of Chinese higher education, the growing focus on national identity and cultural preservation may lead to a re-evaluation of the role of English in the future development of Chinese higher education.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

Based on these findings, this section discusses the unique features of IaH in Chinese HEIs. It presents two key implications: one for the broader principles of IaH and another for adopting IaH in developing countries.

In the evolving landscape of internationalization paradigms in higher education, particularly with the shift toward IaH, this study initially evaluates the current status of IaH practices in China by addressing the research questions posed earlier. It identifies cross-cultural commonalities and local features in the motivation, promotion strategies, and approaches to IaH in China. Based on these findings, this section discusses the unique features of IaH in Chinese HEIs. It presents two key implications: one for the broader principles of IaH and another for the adoption of IaH in developing countries

The Characteristics of IaH in Chinese HEIs

The primary development goal of IaH is “benchmarking,” with limited focus on the outcomes of internationalization

As globalization continues to accelerate, and with growing interdependence among countries alongside more frequent cross-cultural exchanges and cooperation, higher education in developed regions such as Europe and the United States has begun to increasingly emphasise students’ international learning outcomes in implementing IaH. The goal is cultivating global citizens who can appreciate diverse cultures and succeed in the global job market (Van Rompay- Bartels, Watkins, & Geessink, 2023; Finardi, Salvadori, & Wehrli., 2024).

In contrast, however, the case institutions in China tend to focus more on aligning their educational philosophies and teaching practices with international standards during the IaH process. Among the 35 case institutions, 19 have explicitly identified aligning educational and teaching philosophies with international standards as a key approach to IaH. Specific methods include aligning development plans and quality assurance systems with international standards, adopting international recognized teaching methods, and seeking international accreditation.

For example, a private institution (N2) and a program in a public institution (N15) have made deliberate efforts to harmonize their curriculum systems and quality standards with those of benchmark institutions or programs abroad. This suggests that for many Chinese HEIs, IaH mainly focuses on meeting international standards in educational quality and teaching practices rather than prioritizing specific outcomes related to international perspectives and cross-cultural competencies. As revealed in interviews with Chinese university leaders by Gao (2019), “internationalization is perceived as adopting international conventions in higher education management and practice” (p. 116).

This situation may be influenced by China’s social context and the current stage of development in its higher education sector. On one hand, the demand for cross-cultural competence from employers, such as enterprises and other social organizations, has not yet become a priority in China (Zhu et al., 2021). This makes it challenging for HEIs to prioritize the cultivation of global citizens. On the other hand, most Chinese HEIs still face a significant gap in their pursuit of world-class status (Zhao & Hu, 2021). In the context of the prevailing discourse on the construction of “world-class university,” striving to reach international operational standards has become a crucial strategy for institutions to narrow the gap with foreign counterparts (Alemu et al., 2022). As Gao (2019) also pointed out, “For universities in China, the only specified motive for internationalization is to improve educational quality to meet international standards” (p.192).

There is a noticeable reliance on an import-oriented approach in the promotion strategies for IaH, while the effective absorption and utilization of foreign resources remain insufficient

Given the disparities in development levels between China’s higher education system and developed countries, a pivotal strategy for promoting IaH in Chinese HEIs is “leveraging quality foreign resources.” Among the 35 case institutions, 19 have explicitly stated that they have adopted this approach, which is manifested through proactive efforts to deepen collaborations with foreign institutions, facilitate Sino-foreign joint education programs, and import high-quality educational resources from abroad. This is underscored by the enthusiasm with which various HEIs enter cooperation agreements and the increasing proliferation of Sino-foreign joint education courses, classes, programs, and institutions.

However, despite the active importation of foreign resources, most case institutions lack mechanisms for effectively utilizing these resources to promote the construction of internationalized local campuses. This includes challenges such as integrating advanced foreign management philosophies, foreign teachers and students, scientific research cooperation platforms, and more into the teaching, research and talent cultivation systems, and fostering a multicultural organizational atmosphere. Among the 35 case institutions, only one public science and technology institution (N24) explicitly advocates extending the advanced pedagogy of Sino-foreign cooperation beyond cooperative disciplines. Four other institutions (N2, N16, N22, N29) mention the arrangement of co-teachers or Chinese teaching assistants for foreign faculty to enhance the internationalization level of local faculty. In contrast, the remaining 30 institutions lack explicit strategies for integrating foreign resources into the local context.

The core elements of IaH still exhibit an “elite inclination,” with insufficient universality in the scope of beneficiaries

“Universal coverage” is a key aspect of IaH by domestic and international scholars (Nilsson, 2003). This universality is often realized through IoC, as it is within everyday teaching that students can obtain comprehensive international education (Jin, 2023). Regarding IaH approaches, IoC attracts the most attention in this study. Among the 35 case institutions, 27 mentioned it, making it the most frequently cited one. Two institutions (N13 and N27) especially explicitly emphasize the development of an internationalized curriculum as a distinctive feature of their IaH initiatives.

However, a closer look at IoC within the case institutions reveals that the mentioned internationalization efforts tend to be fragmented, focusing mainly on initiatives such as “Bilingual or English-medium instruction,” “International Curriculum Weeks or International Mini-Semesters,” and “Introducing foreign courses.” These initiatives are often tied to Sino-foreign cooperative education programs or high tuition fees. They heavily rely on the sporadic introduction of foreign resources and exhibit a certain degree of selectivity, making it challenging to extend their benefits to all students. Moreover, regarding the essence of IoC—integrating international perspectives, topics, or cross-cultural interactions into the regular classroom environment—only one case institution (N6) reported making such an effort. This approach contradicts the original inclusive intent of IoC, as illustrated by Jones & Reiffenrath (2018), who argued that it should move beyond electives or specialized programmes. Without this comprehensive approach, achieving international education for all students remains daunting.

International Relevance

IaH should be regarded as an ideal goal or guiding philosophy, rather than as a static state

As China’s practice of IaH is still in its early stages and may involve some misconceptions, there are inevitable drawbacks. These drawbacks include neglecting the original goal of fostering global citizenship literacy, underestimating the importance of building internationalization capacity within domestic campuses while relying too heavily on high-quality educational resources from abroad, and making it impossible to achieve the goal of benefiting all the students on campus with the fragmented measures of IoC.

However, these shortcomings are not unique to China; they tend to occur when new initiatives are launched. Globally speaking, during the early stage of IaH, there are also some unsatisfactory practices in other countries. For instance, despite the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture’s high regard for the development of IaH and its integration into the recent international strategy, numerous cognitive misunderstandings and practical deviations still prevail in actual implementation. These include misinterpreting the IoC as EMI teaching, the fragmented implementation of IaH practices across various institutions, and challenges in the social integration of international students and staff (Renfors, Sanna-Mari, 2021). Quite coincidentally, in Japan, EMI programs are regarded as key efforts of internationalizing higher education (Garner, 2024); there is widespread use of EMI in universities; however, due to the limited English communication skills of local students in Japan, usually only a small number of students benefit from it (Shimauichi, 2018). Meanwhile, while many HEIs hire foreign faculty, their role is often restricted to being symbols of internationalization, with their potential to facilitate the internationalization of domestic faculty frequently overlooked (Minami, 2018). Even at Malmö University, where IaH originated, there are some regrettable aspects when initiating the process, such as the oversight of promoting interaction between domestic and international students and insufficient faculty involvement (Nilsson, 2003).

Therefore, while IaH is often expected to provide an international education for all enrolled students and contribute to building the international identity of local campuses, as mentioned in the literature, in practice, it should not be seen as a fixed state. Instead, it should be viewed as an ideal goal or guiding philosophy. The approach towards this ideal is often achieved through continuous efforts to address obstacles, and shortcomings in the process are usually inevitable. However, as long as IaH is consciously embraced and consciously pursued, continuous progress towards improving the ideal goal can be expected. As Nilsson (2003) stated, “I once read in an article that a technical innovation takes 10 years to implement; a medical one, 20 years; and an educational one, 50 years. So, be patient and realistic—these kinds of changes in thinking and attitudes take a very long time” (p. 39).

The development level of higher education matters for the IaH model. Enhancing local internationalization levels by learning from developed countries might be a practical approach to IaH for developing countries

One notable characteristic of China’s IaH initiatives is the significant emphasis placed on the value of high-quality resources from Western countries. These resources include opportunities for collaboration, benchmarking against Western counterparts, and learning from their practices. Such an approach differs from those in developed Western countries. Nevertheless, they fit China’s lower level of higher education development (Zhao & Hu, 2021), thus contributing to the enhancement of IoHE in China.

This experience may offer valuable insights to other developing countries facing similar challenges in higher education internationalization. For example, Vietnam and India increasingly focus on incorporating high-quality international education resources. Vietnam, for instance, has been forming partnerships with prominent global universities to enhance its higher education standards (Phan et al., 2019), while India has ramped up initiatives such as the Global Initiative of Academic Networks (GIAN), which facilitates collaboration with top foreign universities in various academic fields (University Grants Commission Ministry of Education Government of India, 2021). However, despite these efforts, these countries have faced slower progress in implementing widespread internationalization practices due to a variety of obstacles, such as limited funding and resources, arbitrary planning and lack of coordination in international cooperation, blind pursuit of Western education, low level of curriculum and institutional internationalization, and insufficient policy implementation and institutional capacity (Khare, 2021; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Phùng & Phan, 2021).

In contrast, Malaysia has long been a leader in higher education internationalization within Southeast Asia. The country’s proactive approach includes facilitating the establishment of branch campuses of renowned foreign universities, such as Monash University and Newcastle University, aiming to raise domestic education standards while positioning Malaysia as a regional education hub. Unlike China, Malaysia has been actively pursuing this strategy for decades, with a clear focus on attracting top-tier foreign educational resources and establishing long-term international collaborations. However, despite this head start, Malaysia faces its challenges. Cooperation between Malaysian and foreign universities has primarily focused on international student mobility programs, lacking depth and breadth. There is insufficient collaboration in international research partnerships and curriculum co-construction. Moreover, additional challenges include unequal access to international educational opportunities, ineffective development of students’ international competencies, and relatively low educational quality and international recognition (Mustapha et al., 2021; Munusamy, 2021; Suo, 2023). These issues limit the potential for Malaysian higher education to gain advanced knowledge and experience through international collaboration, hindering progress in enhancing its level of internationalization.

These examples underline the significant value of high-quality overseas educational resources for developing countries’ higher education internationalization efforts. While the initial stages of internationalization often rely heavily on external resources, these countries’ experience also

highlights the need for a more sustainable and locally tailored approach, including strengthening domestic capacities and ensuring that the benefits of internationalization extend beyond an elite group of institutions or students.

However, classic literature in the field of IaH, such as *Internationalization at Home: A position paper* (Crowther et al., 2000), which laid the foundation for this area of study, fails to address this particular aspect. This gap is not addressed in the practical elements of IaH discussed by other scholars (see the detailed Literature Review). This omission might stem from the fact that the authors are primarily from developed countries or regions—such as Europe, the United States, and Australia—where higher education is relatively advanced, and the practice of learning from other countries is less common within their contexts.

Thus, China's current state of IaH practices has broadened the global perspective on developing countries' experiences. To some extent, China's developmental path can even be seen as a new model for IaH, offering a unique contribution to academia's understanding of IaH practices. Considering the differences in IaH development paths stemming from disparities in higher education development levels, this approach enriches the broader discourse on IaH.

The research presented herein has certain limitations and aspects that call for further scrutiny. A major limitation is the sample selection. The 35 HEIs included in this study were chosen because they are the only ones publicly available that report adopting IaH strategies. This reliance on publicly accessible data means that the sample does not account for institutions implementing IaH strategies without publishing relevant information, nor does it include institutions with less online visibility. As a result, while these 35 HEIs provide valuable insights into IaH practices, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader landscape of Chinese higher education. Future research could expand the sample by including more institutions with limited online presence or not publicly disclosing their IaH practices. Furthermore, the interpretation of local elements primarily relied on my experience or policy understanding, lacking extensive empirical research. This approach may give rise to limitations such as overgeneralization or insufficient depth in understanding local contexts.

In summary, this study reveals significant opportunities for enhancing the portrayal of the current state of IaH in Chinese HEIs. Future research could benefit from a more in-depth exploration, employing questionnaire surveys, interviews with relevant stakeholders, and other approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Notes

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