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# The Second Generation of Internationalization of Higher Education with Insights from Japan and China: A Strategic Policy for Educational Excellence

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# Abstract

Internationalization of higher education has increasingly shaped the direction and purpose of higher education systems across the world. Its primary aim is to embed global dimensions into institutional strategies, preparing universities to function in the interconnected academe. While internationalization has traditionally focused on mobility, academic collaboration, and knowledge exchange, a new shift has emerged known as the “second generation of internationalization”. Affluent Chinese and Japanese universities, in particular, have moved beyond these traditional rationales toward a second generation of internationalization. This second generation reflects a more strategic international approach that positions universities as active global players in research and practice, enhancing their role as agents of innovation and societal impact. We argue that the second generation of internationalization is not merely an institutional activity, but a core mission integrated into national and institutional agendas. The analysis offers critical insights for higher education policymakers and institutions seeking to align their strategies with this evolving second-generation orientation.


# Introduction

**Part I: Internationalization and rationales for internationalizing**

Internationalization is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions and perspectives. It extends beyond simple notions of international exchange or mobility to encompass broader goals such as enhancing global awareness, promoting intercultural understanding, fostering research collaboration, and addressing global challenges (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Veerasamy & Durst, 2023). Different fora and discourses within the field of higher education recognize the multidimensional character of internationalization. Chan and Dimmock (2008) discuss the complexity of internationalization, acknowledging that it involves much more than simply engaging with other countries or cultures. It encompasses aspects such as globalization, cross-cultural understanding, economic integration, and the exchange of ideas and knowledge on a global scale. The complicated nature of internationalization highlights its broad impact and the need for comprehensive approaches to understanding and navigating it effectively (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023).

While "internationalization" has long been a term in political science and governmental relations, its widespread adoption in the education sector, especially in the US, has surged mainly since the early 1980s (de Wit, 2002; Zapp, et al., 2021; Deuel, 2022). During this decade, internationalization was commonly defined at the institutional level and in terms of a set of activities. The global aspect of higher education is growing in significance while becoming increasingly intricate. Prominent universities in the U.S.—such as Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University, for example have persistently pursued internationalization initiatives and strategies, incorporating intercultural, international, or global dimensions into their mission and objectives (Porfirio, 2013). Knight (2004) highlights that universities undertake internationalization for diverse motivations aimed at enhancing international and intercultural understanding of staff and students, as well as achieving a strong

worldwide reputation and recognition as an international high-quality institution. This is often a truism for many postsecondary institutions that engage in internationalization processes across different cultural settings, and it goes to a certain extent of defining the realities of internationalization. According to Arum and van de Water (as cited in Knight, 2004, p. 9), internationalization refers to “the multiple activities, programs, and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange, and technical cooperation.” This definition approaches internationalization as a term for activities at the institutional level. However, it is important to illustrate that internationalization must be integrated and sustained at the institutional level. Internationalization was defined as the “process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 2004, p. 7). Elsewhere, Soderqvist’s (2002) definition focused on the education change process with a sort of holistic view of management at the institutional level. Soderqvist (2002) defines internationalization as “a transformational process from a national to an international higher education institution. This evolution entails integrating an international dimension into all facets of holistic management, aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning and achieving desired competencies” (p. 29).

This definition, while illustrating an evolution at the institutional level, contains embedded rationales that limit its applicability to institutions and countries viewing internationalization as broader than just teaching, learning, and competency development. Consequently, it falls short of providing a comprehensive definition. However, this paper concurs that internationalization continues to remain a process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education as offered by Knight (2004). The process conveys that internationalization is an ongoing and continuing effort in higher education institutions (HEIs). By framing internationalization as a process, it shifts the focus to a tripartite model of education—input, process, and output—making the definition less generic. This approach takes into account the unique priorities of a country, institution, or specific stakeholder group, thereby preventing a universally applicable characterization of internationalization (Knight, 2004). The terms "international," "intercultural," and "global dimension" are deliberately employed as a triad to encompass the full scope of internationalization. "International" denotes relationships between nations, cultures, or countries. But this does not wholly encompass what the term "international" entails.

Internationalization also entails engaging with the diversity of cultures within countries, communities, and institutions. Therefore, "intercultural" addresses the aspects of internationalization within domestic contexts (Knight, 2004). As Knight (2004) argued, the concept of integration specifically refers to the process of infusing or embedding both the international and intercultural dimensions into policies and programs within HEIs. This ensures that the international dimension remains central rather than marginal and is sustainable over time. Conversely, purpose, function, and delivery represent different facets. Purpose refers to the overall goals and role of postsecondary education in a country or region, or more specifically, the mission or mandate of a single institution (Knight, 2004). "Function" refers to the fundamental elements or tasks characterizing both a national postsecondary system and an individual institution. On the other hand, according to Knight (2004), delivery is a narrower concept, referring to the

provision of educational courses and programs, whether domestically or internationally. This category encompasses offerings by traditional higher education institutions as well as new providers, such as companies interested in the global delivery of their programs and services, often prioritizing delivery over the international or intercultural dimensions of campus life and functions. Thus, understanding the stages and dimensions of internationalization is paramount. Figure 1 presents a detailed model of internationalization in higher education systems in cognizance of Knight's (2004) definition of internationalization. This perspective supports the motivations underlying the first and second generations of internationalization among Japanese and Chinese universities while acknowledging the evolving complexities of internationalization and its broader role in promoting global awareness, intercultural understanding, and international collaboration to address shared global challenges. Additionally, the model highlights the importance of integration and alignment with institutional goals and objectives to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of internationalization efforts.

The assumptions of internationalization offer insights into the rationales for internationalization within Asian HEIs. As Knight (2004) rightly pointed out, the rationales propelling internationalization differ significantly from one institution to another, from government department to government department, from stakeholder to stakeholder, and from country to country. These varying and sometimes conflicting rationales contribute to the complexity of the international dimension of education. However, they also underscore the substantial contributions that internationalization can make. Chan and Dimmock (2008) demonstrated that the characteristics of different universities, such as a British international university and a Chinese university, influence their motivations for internationalization. For the British university, internationalization serves to enhance its reputation on the global stage, whereas the Chinese university aims to contribute to its homeland through internationalization efforts (Li & Xue, 2022). Similarly, in the work of Horta (2009) on the internationalization of a national research-intensive HEI and a world leading HEI, it observes that the former aims to bolster its student population, while the latter focuses on elevating its global status and attracting talent to maintain its exceptional quality.

In their classic work, Seeber et al. (2016) examined the rationales for internationalization among HEIs, identifying factors operating at the environmental, organizational, and intra-organizational levels. Their analysis drew on a large-scale survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) and two extensive datasets documenting the organizational characteristics of European HEIs: the European Micro Data Collection (EUMIDA) and the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). According to Seeber et al. (2016), the environmental level pertains to the global and national contexts in which HEIs operate. The organizational level refers to the goals of the HEI itself, while the intra-organizational level focuses on the roles played by various internal actors in the processes of internationalization. These rationales for internationalization are similar to those of HEIs in China and Japan, such as Nanjing University, Peking University, Kyoto University, and the University of Tokyo. Drawing on the multilevel framework proposed by Seeber et al. (2016), we examine three interconnected levels of internationalization— environmental, organizational, and intra-organizational.

***Environmental Level***

The environmental level is shaped by institutional forces, as legitimacy, competition for resources, status, and reputation serve as significant drivers of organizational decisions and underlying rationales for action. Marginson (2006) illustrated the importance of environmental factors in shaping the strategic goals and priorities of HEIs, particularly the growing influence of globalization, international competition, institutional prestige, global university rankings, and the pursuit of academic and research excellence. These factors increasingly encourage universities to compete for international students, talented faculty, research funding, and recognition within the global higher education landscape. Within this framework, HEIs seek to position themselves strategically within both global and national contexts while responding to changing expectations surrounding internationalization (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023). However, the nature and intensity of these competitive and institutional pressures vary considerably depending on universities' geographic locations, cultural environments, national policy priorities, and socioeconomic conditions (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). At HEIs, these pressures can impact everything from resource utilization to curriculum development and research activities. So, for HEIs to do their jobs well and stay important in a world that is becoming more connected, they need to understand and deal with these environmental factors. Within the environmental context of HEIs, Seeber et al. (2016) proposed two macro-level hypotheses, which are:

Macro-level Hypothesis 1: This hypothesis suggests that preferences for specific rationales for internationalization are influenced by the higher education system in which an HEI is situated. This influence stems from differences in institutional pressures and available resources within each higher education system. Essentially, the structure, policies, and priorities of the national or regional higher education system shape how HEIs perceive and pursue internationalization (Seeber et al., 2016).

Macro-level Hypothesis 2: This hypothesis posits that HEIs located in higher education systems characterized by strong competition for resources are more inclined to adopt an economic rationale for internationalization. In environments where resources are scarce or fiercely contested, HEIs may prioritize internationalization strategies that bring in revenue, attract talent, or enhance their competitive position in the global higher education market (Seeber et al., 2016).

These hypotheses underscore the complicated relationship among institutional contexts, institutional goals, and external pressures in shaping the internationalization strategies of HEIs. They suggest that the broader higher education landscape, including national policies, funding mechanisms, and cultural norms, significantly influences how HEIs conceptualize and operationalize internationalization.

***Organizational level***

According to Oliver, as cited in (Seeber et al. 2016), institutional and competitive pressures are not passively absorbed by HEIs. Instead, organizations may strategically decouple, and these pressures may sometimes conflict with organizational goals. At the organizational level, internationalization tends to align either with research and scientific production or with teaching. Within the organizational context of HEIs, Seeber et al. (2016) proposed three meso-level hypotheses, namely:

Meso-level Hypothesis 1: This hypothesis suggests that private for-profit HEIs are more inclined to adopt an economic rationale for internationalization. Private for-profit institutions often face distinct pressures related to revenue generation and market competition, which may lead them to prioritize internationalization strategies that yield financial benefits, such as attracting international students or establishing lucrative partnerships.

Meso-level Hypothesis 2: This hypothesis posits that HEIs oriented towards research activity are more likely to adopt a rationale for internationalization consistent with these activities. This includes strengthening institutional research and knowledge production capacity. Such postsecondary institutions are less likely to prioritize rationales related to benefits for teaching and students, as their primary focus is on advancing research excellence.

Meso-level Hypothesis 3: This hypothesis suggests that teaching-oriented HEIs are more likely to adopt rationales for internationalization that emphasize benefits for teaching and students. These rationales may include increased international awareness or deeper engagement with global issues among students. It also includes the enhanced internationalization of the curriculum to incorporate diverse perspectives and global competencies. Exposure to international best practices and pedagogical approaches enhances the quality of teaching and learning. Teaching-oriented HEIs prioritize educational outcomes and pedagogical excellence, viewing internationalization as a means to enrich the educational experience for their students and enhance teaching quality within their institutions.

Thus, these three meso-level hypotheses underscore how institutional characteristics, strategic priorities, and academic missions shape the rationales for internationalization among HEIs. They suggest that institutions pursue internationalization differently depending on whether their primary objectives emphasize economic competitiveness, research excellence and knowledge production, or enhanced teaching and student learning experiences (Seeber et al., 2016).

***Intra-organizational level***

At the intra-organizational level, internal groups within HEIs drive internationalization efforts by making compelling demands. Seeber et al. (2016) argue that internal groups within these HEIs tend to assign and support different rationales for internationalization. The rationale adopted by the HEI reflects the relative influence of internal groups on the internationalization process. Using the micro-level hypothesis, Seeber et al. (2016) propose that an HEI's internationalization rationale reflects the influence of internal actors on the internationalization process. While variations in interests and views exist among members of the same group of actors, such as academics from different disciplines and middle managers with varying backgrounds in a postsecondary institution, it is reasonable to expect that differences regarding internationalization processes are greater between students, academics, middle managers, and institutional leaders than within these groups. Internal groups in postsecondary institutions tend to initiate large-scale objectives in internationalization efforts. These objectives often highlight the broad spectrum of internationalization and its importance in preparing students for global citizenship, enhancing teaching and learning outcomes, promoting academic collaboration, and fostering

international networking among faculty and researchers. By integrating these multilevel factors, Figure 2 provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how institutional, organizational, and individual factors interact to shape the rationales for internationalization in higher education. This framework highlights the complexity and dynamism of internationalization processes, suggesting that they require a nuanced approach that considers multiple levels of analysis.

**Part II: The first generation of internationalization in East Asian higher education**

The first generation of internationalization in Asian higher education was characterized by an outward-looking East-to-West flow of talent, whereby governments and universities strategically sponsored promising students and faculty members to pursue advanced education, research training, and professional development in Western institutions as part of broader national modernization efforts (Altbach & Selvaratnam, 1989; Huang, 2007; Li & Xue, 2022; Kuroda et al., 2024). This historical pattern can be understood through Seeber et al.'s (2016) intra-organizational perspective, which emphasizes how internal institutional actors, including university leaders, faculty members, and administrators, influence the motivations and priorities underlying internationalization. In Japan and China, these actors helped translate national educational modernization goals into institutional practices through overseas academic mobility, faculty development, knowledge acquisition, and the adoption of international academic standards. Thus, the first generation of internationalization can be understood as an institutionally mediated process of knowledge acquisition and capacity building, in which internal academic priorities and national development objectives collectively shaped the early internationalization trajectories of Japanese and Chinese universities.

Emerging largely in the post-World War II period and extending into the first decade of the twenty-first century, this phase of internationalization was driven by national aspirations to modernize higher education systems, accelerate scientific and technological advancement, and strengthen economic competitiveness through the acquisition of global knowledge and expertise (Guo et al., 2022; Kuroda et al., 2024). Rather than emphasizing reciprocal partnerships or global institutional positioning, the primary objective of this first generation of internationalization was knowledge acquisition and institutional capacity building through the adoption of Western educational models, academic norms, and research practices (Altbach & Selvaratnam, 1989; Huang, 2007; Mok, 2007).

Huang (2007) provided important historical insight into the origins of internationalization in Asia, particularly in China and Japan, arguing that its roots can be traced back to the latter part of the nineteenth century. Although internationalization is often portrayed as a contemporary phenomenon associated with globalization, many Asian countries had already begun modernizing their higher education systems by sponsoring students and academics to pursue advanced study and research abroad. China and Japan exemplify this early phase of internationalization (Huang, 2007; Li & Xue, 2022). While both countries selectively adopted foreign academic models and institutional practices, they simultaneously preserved significant elements of their national educational traditions and curricular autonomy. Consequently, the early internationalization of higher education in Asia was largely

characterized by a one-way transfer of Western knowledge, academic standards, and institutional practices, which profoundly shaped the subsequent evolution of higher education systems across the region (Huang, 2007; Ren & Wang, 2022). Thus, understanding this historical trajectory is essential because it demonstrates that internationalization in Asia long predates contemporary globalization and reflects a sustained commitment to educational modernization through international engagement. This first generation laid the institutional and intellectual foundations upon which later forms of internationalization—including strategic global partnerships, research collaboration, international rankings, and the contemporary wave of internationalization—would emerge. Recognizing these historical developments provides an important context for examining not only what internationalization is, but also who defines it and for what purposes.

**Part III: The second generation of internationalization in East Asian higher education**

Building upon Knight's (2004) foundational conceptualization of internationalization and Seeber et al.'s (2016) multilevel framework of internationalization rationales, we introduce a new conceptual lens, which we term the "second generation of internationalization in higher education." We conceptualize this second generation as a strategic and institutionally driven phase in which universities move beyond predominantly outward academic mobility and knowledge acquisition toward deliberate efforts to strengthen global competitiveness, institutional reputation, international research collaboration, and societal engagement. As illustrated in Figure 3 in our conceptual framework, this generation is characterized by three interconnected dimensions: global knowledge co-creation and innovation, socioeconomic competitiveness and talent circulation, and cultural diplomacy and global citizenship education. These dimensions are supported by six interrelated drivers: research, international collaboration, intercultural dialogue, global talent development, civic responsibility, and soft power, which collectively contribute to strategic global engagement for educational excellence. In Japan, these priorities are reflected in government-supported internationalization initiatives, including the Global 30 Project and Top Global University Project, alongside the expansion of English-medium instruction, international academic recruitment, cross-border research partnerships, and institutional efforts to strengthen intercultural engagement and global visibility (Yoshida, 2016; Chen, 2026; Entrich, 2026; Bengü et al., 2026). Similarly, China's internationalization strategies increasingly emphasize world-class university development, international talent recruitment, academic collaboration, and the circulation of globally trained scholars, reflecting the relationship between national development priorities, institutional competitiveness, and international educational partnerships (LeBeau & Zhang, 2022; Si, 2026; Mei & Feng, 2026). Consequently, these developments illustrate how internationalization extends beyond conventional academic exchanges to encompass research innovation, knowledge co-creation, global talent circulation, intercultural dialogue, educational diplomacy, and broader societal contributions. Thus, we argue that the second generation of internationalization represents a multidimensional institutional strategy through which universities pursue strategic global engagement for educational excellence, while navigating the opportunities, inequalities, and institutional tensions associated with an increasingly interconnected global higher education landscape.

We interrogate the second generation of internationalization to highlight the paradigmatic shift in higher education internationalization in contemporary times. Unlike earlier rationales articulated by Knight (2004), which largely emphasized academic, cultural, political, and economic motivations at national and regional levels, contemporary internationalization as shown in Figure 3 is increasingly anchored in universities' aspirations to position themselves as global actors within an interconnected educational ecosystem (Buckner, 2019; Zapp, et al., 2021; Lee & Ramirez, 2023). This change shows a strategic shift: universities are no longer just extending their institutional antennae to participate in transnational exchanges; they are actively trying to become globally recognized centers of excellence. Institutions in Asia (e.g., China, South Korea, and Japan) and the United States are expanding beyond community, state, or national rationales toward global landscapes where international rankings, brand recognition, and visibility play critical roles in shaping strategic decisions. As such, the second generation is not simply about mobility or partnership; it is about attracting world-class faculty and students, securing competitive research funding, and maintaining prestigious international classification statuses that align with global and regional ranking systems (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Montesinos et al., 2008; Buckner, et al., 2021; Ruano-Borbalan, 2024).

The desire to join global research networks, make institutions more competitive, and use cultural diplomacy and global citizenship education to increase soft power is what drives this second-generation agenda. While Chinese and Japanese universities may continue to serve their local and regional communities, a global orientation has become a strategic imperative—one that seeks to co-construct the global educational ecosystem through knowledge production, talent circulation, and intercultural engagement (Marginson, 2022; Hudzik, 2022; Cai & Leask, 2026). This contemporary rationale underscores that internationalization is no longer peripheral; rather, it is embedded at the heart of institutional identity and strategy, shaping how universities imagine their futures in a globalized knowledge economy.

At the intersection of these domains lies the intentionality of strategic global engagement for educational excellence, which encapsulates the contemporary goals of universities as they internationalize—not merely to exchange knowledge, but to actively shape and co-construct the global educational ecosystem (Cai & Ahmad, 2023; Cai & Leask, 2026). Chinese and Japanese universities are working to create collaborative, transnational research networks and produce knowledge together to solve important global problems like climate change, artificial intelligence, and sustainability. Socioeconomic competitiveness and talent circulation highlight the motivations of nations and HEIs to attract global talent, strengthen workforce capacities, and advance innovation and prestige (Knight, 2018; Cai et al., 2020; de Wit, 2020; Kapfudzaruwa, 2025). Finally, cultural diplomacy and global citizenship education embody the strategic use of higher education as a tool for soft power, intercultural dialogue, and civic responsibility in an increasingly interconnected world. Universities demonstrate this important strategy as a global player—positioning themselves to contribute to the betterment of the global society as part of their civic responsibility. This involves actively addressing pressing societal challenges such as floods, droughts, and the broader impacts of climate change. This orientation aligns with the vision of Brandenburg et al. (2019), who advocate for a realignment of internationalization

efforts toward an “internationalization of higher education for society.” This perspective extends the purpose of internationalization beyond institutional prestige and the benefits accruing to students and staff, emphasizing intentional contributions to the well-being of communities at home and abroad (Brandenburg et al., 2019).

The second generation of internationalizing higher education has also become increasingly visible in the activities of Chinese universities’ efforts to establish Chinese language institutions, such as Confucius Institutes, across African countries, including Malawi. The Kamuzu University of Health Science (KUHeS) now has a purpose-built Confucius Institute complex that makes it easier to teach Chinese formally, have cross-cultural exchanges, and do academic work (University of Malawi, 2026). Speaking at the inauguration ceremony of the complex, Minister of Higher Education Dr. Kabwila shared, “The Confucius Institute in Malawi was established with an aim to strengthen educational and cultural ties between Malawi and China, with a special focus on promoting Chinese language learning and cultural understanding” (University of Malawi, 2026). Such initiatives signal a deliberate effort to internationalize by extending linguistic and cultural influence while enabling Malawian students and professionals to better engage linguistically with Chinese nationals in diplomacy and global trade. This approach contributes to the argument we are making in this paper that the second generation’s goal also seeks to increase cultural exchange through education for the purpose of gaining soft power.

**Part IV: Internationalization of curriculums through EMI in Japanese higher education**

In Japan, the concept of internationalization takes a unique perspective, particularly within the realm of higher education. The process of internationalizing higher education has begun to significantly impact Japan's educational system, presenting new meanings and challenges (Ota, 2016). It plays a pivotal role in both academic and social progress, all the while preserving its rich traditional culture and national identity. In recent times, various policies have been introduced by the government, universities, and industries aimed at attracting a diverse pool of students and top-tier researchers from Asia and beyond (Tsuruta, 2013). These initiatives are geared towards fostering greater exchange and collaboration, promoting internationalization within the country, and facilitating the development of a globally competitive human resource pool (Yoshida, 2016; Shimauchi, 2018). As a non-English-speaking, non-Western, and non-postcolonial Asian nation, Japan approaches this phase of internationalization with a distinct viewpoint, particularly regarding English imperialism (Shimauchi, 2018). Shimauchi (2018) noted that Japan has encountered both internal and external factors propelling the "English-ization" of its higher education system. As pointed out by Shimauchi (2018), internal factors include the strategic push by Japanese universities to elevate their global profiles, attract a more diverse body of international students, and modernize teaching practices to meet emerging workforce needs. Many Japanese universities view EMI as a pathway to internationalization, academic competitiveness, and curricular

innovation—a trend highlighted in studies showing how EMI is used to reform teaching and enhance institutional global standing (Hashimoto, 2013; Leong, 2017; Rose & McKinley, 2018). Externally, factors such as globalization, international labor market competition, and state-driven policy incentives encouraging cross-border academic mobility have accelerated the adoption of EMI (Shimauchi et al., 2018; Rose & McKinley, 2018). These external influences stem in part from broader national concerns about economic competitiveness and Japan's positioning in a rapidly globalizing knowledge economy (Aspinall, 2012; Murata, et al., 2019).

One pivotal international factor is the rise in global student mobility (Shimauchi, 2018). Despite being an economic powerhouse located in a non-Western region, Japan has traditionally attracted international students, especially from Asia (Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2020). Similarly, the decreasing number of domestic students viewing EMI as both a promotional tool and a way to experience international education domestically and the necessity for global human resources proficient in English are significant factors driving the internationalization process in Japanese higher education (Yonezawa, 2014; Shimauchi, 2018). Every HEI aims to internationalize, often starting by devising strategies to execute their internationalization policies. Therefore, the factors prompting the implementation of EMI in Japanese universities, classified as either internal (domestic) or external (global), encompass intercultural, international, and global dimensions as conceptualized in Knight's (2004) definition of internalization.

Driven by the demand for a globally competitive workforce, Japan's government policies heavily support international efforts within the country's higher education landscape (Tsuruta, 2013; Ota, 2018; Shimauchi, 2018). Initiatives like the Global 30 Project (started in 2009), the Project for the Promotion of Global Human Resource Development (launched in 2012), and the Top Global University Project (commenced in 2014) have been instrumental in moving these higher education policies forward. These programs enable designated universities to offer English-Medium Degree Programs (EMDPs), aligning with global standards and enhancing competitiveness. However, as noted by Shimauchi (2018), this focus on elite institutions exacerbates disparities among Japanese universities. The top-down approach to internationalization, driven by national policies, aims to bolster the competitiveness of the nation's universities and attract global talent. Elite universities view this emphasis on English-language curriculum as a form of Japanese soft power diplomacy (Murata et al., 2019).

Shimauchi (2017) highlighted how international education, particularly through Japanese studies, serves as a tool for disseminating Japanese values globally. Emerging international liberal arts programs in EMI expose international students to Japan-related content and cultivate domestic students as "global human resources" with a distinct Japanese identity. Thus, these internal ambitions and external expectations illustrate how Japan's higher education system is continually negotiating its role in an interconnected global landscape (Buckner, et al., 2021).

The role of EMI in Japan's higher education internationalization exhibits a fundamental dichotomy. Knight's (2004) classification of internationalization activities into "internationalization abroad" and

"internationalization at home" proves useful. Shimauchi (2018) categorizes internationalization activities in Japan within the framework provided by Knight's classification. In the Japanese context, "internationalization abroad" includes efforts to promote "Japan" worldwide, while "internationalization at home" refers to Japan's internal transformations to meet global demands.

As Shimauchi (2018) explained, Japan's internationalization agenda in higher education is shaped by a dual vision: projecting Japanese language, culture, and academic values globally while simultaneously transforming domestic higher education institutions to meet international standards. This twofold commitment reflects Japan's broader goal of cultivating globally competitive human resources capable of thriving in multicultural environments and representing Japan abroad. Scholars note that this outward-facing and inward-facing approach is consistent with national policy efforts aimed at strengthening Japan's global presence through academic exchanges, student mobility, and the international promotion of Japanese culture (Yonezawa, 2014). At the same time, the internal dimension of internationalization—particularly the expansion of EMI—aligns with institutional efforts to internationalize campus environments, diversify student populations, and enhance English proficiency among faculty and students (Yamamoto, 2018). Additionally, Japan's emphasis on global human resource development reflects economic and geopolitical pressures to remain competitive within a rapidly globalizing knowledge economy, positioning EMI as a strategic tool for both national development and higher education reform (Aspinall, 2013; Yamamoto, 2018). Hence, these perspectives support Shimauchi's (2018) argument that internationalization in Japan operates through complementary external and internal channels designed to elevate Japan's global engagement while transforming learning environments at home.

**Part V: Internationalization experiences in Chinese higher education**

Chen and Huang (2013) argued that internationalization efforts in China date back to the ample evidence of the multiplicity of nationalities among Confucius's students and that internationalization experiences in China witnessed two notable phases. The two phases illustrate the evolution of China's policy concerning the internationalization of higher education, which reflects significant shifts in priorities and strategies over the past two decades. During the first phase, from 1978 to 1992, China's focus was primarily on addressing the urgent need for professionals and experts with advanced knowledge and technology (Huang, 2003, 2007; Wang, 2008). This period was characterized by efforts to send students, scholars, and faculty abroad for advanced studies, inviting foreign scholars and experts to China, and promoting the teaching and learning of foreign languages, particularly English. These initiatives were driven partly by China's isolation from the Western world following the Korean War and its subsequent desire to catch up with developments in advanced countries.

The second phase, starting from 1993 to the present, saw a shift in focus towards addressing new challenges and opportunities arising from increased global mobility and the internationalization of higher education (Huang, 2003; Li & Xue, 2022). With growing numbers of Chinese scholars, faculty members, and students studying abroad, attention turned towards encouraging their return, attracting foreign

students to study in China, and promoting transnational education and internationalization of university curricula. Key policy documents and speeches, such as those issued by the State Education Commission (SEC) and the then Minister of Education Ms. Chen, had a major influence on the direction of Chinese higher education policy (Huang, 2003; Li & Xue, 2022). These initiatives aim to promote cooperation and joint operations between Chinese and foreign institutions, as well as open China's education system to the world more widely and actively. The transformation of Chinese higher education from an elitist system to one focused on massification reflects broader societal goals of promoting social equity, strengthening national competitiveness, and achieving national development objectives (Huang, 2003, 2007). This shift has led to significant expansions in enrollment, providing millions of young people with access to higher education and contributing to the nation's goals of creating a well-off, harmonious, and innovative society (Huang, 2007). Still, other scholars argue that this enrollment expansion in Chinese higher education institutions should not be mistaken as a characterization of pure public good due to such institutions' selective nature (Tian & Liu, 2018). However, that does not detract China from the internationalization rationales in higher education institutions which aim to achieve objectives such as:

1. Deeper engagement with global issues by students: This involves preparing students to work effectively in foreign and culturally diverse environments, enhancing their global awareness and intercultural competencies (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Li & Xue, 2022).

2. Improved quality of teaching and learning: Internationalization contributes to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning within HEIs by exposing students and faculty to diverse perspectives and innovative pedagogical approaches (Hudson, 2016; Shimauchi, 2018).

3. Adjustment of curricula to international standards: Internationalization enables HEIs to align their curricula with international benchmarks and standards, ensuring that graduates are equipped with globally relevant knowledge and skills (Cai et al., 2020; de Wit, 2020).

4. International cooperation and capacity building: Internationalization facilitates collaboration between HEIs across national boundaries, leading to mutual capacity building, knowledge exchange, and research collaboration (Shimauchi, 2018).

5. International networking by faculty and researchers: Internationalization fosters networking opportunities for faculty and researchers, allowing them to establish connections, share expertise, and collaborate on research projects across geographical boundaries and nation-states (Hudzik, 2022; Cai & Leask, 2026).

**Part VI: Implications for policy direction & conclusion**

Indeed, the evolution of internationalization has been accompanied by shifts in meanings, rationales, and approaches, all within the changing global context. However, the foundational aspects of studying internationalization have remained relatively consistent. Despite the broadening of the concept and the emergence of new rationales, approaches, and strategies as noted in Knight (2004), the fundamental

principles underlying the study of internationalization have endured over time. These foundational principles often include understanding the interconnectedness of nations, cultures, economies, and societies, as well as recognizing the importance of cross-border interactions, cooperation, and exchange. The internationalization efforts of HEIs in Japan and China have reinforced this. Moreover, scholars and practitioners continue to explore how internationalization manifests in various sectors and contexts, such as education, business, politics, and culture.

While the specifics of internationalization may vary across different disciplines and fields, as seen in Japan and China, the core questions and concerns remain centered on how individuals, organizations, and nations engage with the global community, adapt to changing dynamics, and navigate the complexities of an interconnected world. Therefore, while the concept of internationalization has indeed become broad and also a conscientious pursuit of excellence, its study still relies on foundational principles that emphasize understanding, adaptation, and collaboration in a constantly changing global landscape. Knight and de Wit (2018) observe a significant shift in the drivers behind national policies related to the internationalization of higher education. The scholars pointed out that economic and political rationales are becoming increasingly prominent, reflecting the growing emphasis on global competitiveness, economic development, and geopolitical influence. Economic motivations often include attracting international students for tuition revenue, fostering research collaboration for innovation and knowledge transfer, and enhancing the international reputation of universities to attract investment and talent, which have characterized the internationalization efforts of notable postsecondary institutions in China, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Sun Yat-sen University, to name a few.

Political rationales may involve diplomatic objectives, soft power projection, and fostering international partnerships for mutual benefits. This is why the Chinese government's support for students to pursue studies abroad in nations such as the US, UK, and Europe serves a comprehensive agenda of nurturing talent and repatriating valuable expertise and knowledge to bolster China's progress (Huang, 2003, 2007). Upon their return, these students typically bring back advanced technical competencies, a nuanced grasp of cross-cultural dynamics, and extensive international connections, all of which can substantially enrich Chinese universities and industries. Equally, the introduction of EMI education in Japan has primarily been promoted at the national level through policies aimed at boosting the enrollment of international students. The goal is to break down linguistic barriers and foster a workforce that is both globally aware and competitive. At the institutional level, Japanese universities have a specific and strategic outlook, viewing EMI programs as a means of marketing and revenue generation.

We argue that the second generation of internationalization in higher education in China and Japan is to improve their educational environments and make it easier for people from different cultures and political backgrounds to work together and share ideas. The implication of the Chinese government's sponsorship of students to study abroad is that it aims to strategically invest in human capital development. By sending students overseas to acquire advanced skills and knowledge, the government anticipates a return on this investment in the form of a more skilled workforce and enhanced capabilities

within Chinese universities and industries. Additionally, it suggests a recognition of the importance of international exposure and cross-cultural understanding in fostering innovation and competitiveness on a global scale. Therefore, policy directions on internationalization in China and Japan's higher education settings need to address sustainability and internationalizing curriculum and faculty with the aim of broadening international research and teaching. These aspects are crucial indicators for international accreditations and rankings of higher education institutions.

The implementation of EMI programs reflects a commitment to the second generation of internationalization, which is often taken into account by accrediting bodies and ranking organizations. Factors such as the presence of foreign language programs, including graduate-level programs offered in English; international student enrollment; faculty diversity; and research collaboration across borders contribute significantly to an institution's standing in global rankings and accreditation assessments, which Japanese and Chinese postsecondary institutions—the University of Tokyo and China Agricultural University, for example have been exploring since the inception of the internationalization agenda. Therefore, effectively integrating EMI into the educational system can enhance the international reputation and prestige of HEIs in Asia, further bolstering their recognition and competitiveness on the global stage. Moreover, such integration will require the need to establish the political determination to cultivate leadership within HEIs possessing robust, multidisciplinary academic credentials, proficient language skills, and substantial administrative leadership experience.

The second generation of the internationalization framework presents significant policy implications, as it depicts that HEIs are no longer engaging in internationalization as a peripheral activity but as a strategic core mission. HEIs across Japan and China increasingly recognize internationalization as an avenue to advance global research networks and teaching, strengthen economic competitiveness, and foster intercultural understanding. The second generation aligns institutional strategies with global agendas for innovation, workforce mobility, and civic engagement. As a forward-looking framework, it provides guidance for universities in policy design, institutional strategic planning, and global engagement initiatives through the exchange of students, faculty, and knowledge. It represents a paradigmatic shift from earlier motivations toward a more intentional, strategically engaged and a globally responsive higher education landscape.

The second generation of internationalization is no longer just an extra activity for institutions; it is now a core mission that is part of national and institutional plans. In China, top universities such as Tsinghua University and Peking University have moved beyond traditional rationales of internationalization centered on student and faculty mobility to adopt strategic approaches that link global engagement with research excellence, innovation networks, and societal impact through civic engagement. Similarly, in Japan, institutions such as the University of Tokyo and the University of Tsukuba explicitly frame their international strategies as efforts to contribute to global knowledge production and address shared societal challenges through transnational collaboration. These developments demonstrate how internationalization is increasingly integrated into broader institutional missions and national strategies,

positioning universities as key global actors shaping research, innovation, and international cooperation (Sangroula, n.d; University of Tokyo, n.d; Li & Xue 2022; Chen, 2026).

Effective engagement with an international audience necessitates a profound comprehension of both the national cultural identities and the overarching motivations driving participation in the global arena. Policy initiatives must prioritize the allocation of sufficient funding to facilitate the comprehensive management of the internationalization process in a postsecondary institution interested in internationalizing, ensuring its progression towards achieving its intended objectives, functionality, and successful implementation. The second-generation rationale for internationalization of any postsecondary institutions aspiring to internationalize should encompass both specific objectives and broader goals, including the competency of institutions to effectively engage both locally and globally with counterpart institutions in matters of teaching and research. This approach should serve as a strategic policy aimed at achieving educational excellence in both teaching and research, while simultaneously exerting a significant influence within the globalized academic community.

# Part I: Internationalization and rationales for internationalizing

Internationalization is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions and perspectives. It extends beyond simple notions of international exchange or mobility to encompass broader goals such as enhancing global awareness, promoting intercultural understanding, fostering research collaboration, and addressing global challenges (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Veerasamy & Durst, 2023). Different fora and discourses within the field of higher education recognize the multidimensional character of internationalization. Chan and Dimmock (2008) discuss the complexity of internationalization, acknowledging that it involves much more than simply engaging with other countries or cultures. It encompasses aspects such as globalization, cross-cultural understanding, economic integration, and the exchange of ideas and knowledge on a global scale. The complicated nature of internationalization highlights its broad impact and the need for comprehensive approaches to understanding and navigating it effectively (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023).

While "internationalization" has long been a term in political science and governmental relations, its widespread adoption in the education sector, especially in the US, has surged mainly since the early 1980s (de Wit, 2002; Zapp, et al., 2021; Deuel, 2022). During this decade, internationalization was commonly defined at the institutional level and in terms of a set of activities. The global aspect of higher education is growing in significance while becoming increasingly intricate. Prominent universities in the U.S.—such as Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University, for example have persistently pursued internationalization initiatives and strategies, incorporating intercultural, international, or global dimensions into their mission and objectives (Porfirio, 2013). Knight (2004) highlights that universities undertake internationalization for diverse motivations aimed at enhancing international and intercultural understanding of staff and students, as well as achieving a strong worldwide reputation and recognition as an international high-quality institution. This is often a truism for many postsecondary institutions that engage in internationalization processes across different

cultural settings, and it goes to a certain extent of defining the realities of internationalization. According to Arum and van de Water (as cited in Knight, 2004, p. 9), internationalization refers to “the multiple activities, programs, and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange, and technical cooperation.” This definition approaches internationalization as a term for activities at the institutional level. However, it is important to illustrate that internationalization must be integrated and sustained at the institutional level. Internationalization was defined as the “process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 2004, p. 7). Elsewhere, Soderqvist’s (2002) definition focused on the education change process with a sort of holistic view of management at the institutional level. Soderqvist (2002) defines internationalization as “a transformational process from a national to an international higher education institution. This evolution entails integrating an international dimension into all facets of holistic management, aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning and achieving desired competencies” (p. 29).

This definition, while illustrating an evolution at the institutional level, contains embedded rationales that limit its applicability to institutions and countries viewing internationalization as broader than just teaching, learning, and competency development. Consequently, it falls short of providing a comprehensive definition. However, this paper concurs that internationalization continues to remain a process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education as offered by Knight (2004). The process conveys that internationalization is an ongoing and continuing effort in higher education institutions (HEIs). By framing internationalization as a process, it shifts the focus to a tripartite model of education—input, process, and output—making the definition less generic. This approach takes into account the unique priorities of a country, institution, or specific stakeholder group, thereby preventing a universally applicable characterization of internationalization (Knight, 2004). The terms "international," "intercultural," and "global dimension" are deliberately employed as a triad to encompass the full scope of internationalization. "International" denotes relationships between nations, cultures, or countries. But this does not wholly encompass what the term "international" entails.

Internationalization also entails engaging with the diversity of cultures within countries, communities, and institutions. Therefore, "intercultural" addresses the aspects of internationalization within domestic contexts (Knight, 2004). As Knight (2004) argued, the concept of integration specifically refers to the process of infusing or embedding both the international and intercultural dimensions into policies and programs within HEIs. This ensures that the international dimension remains central rather than marginal and is sustainable over time. Conversely, purpose, function, and delivery represent different facets. Purpose refers to the overall goals and role of postsecondary education in a country or region, or more specifically, the mission or mandate of a single institution (Knight, 2004). "Function" refers to the fundamental elements or tasks characterizing both a national postsecondary system and an individual institution. On the other hand, according to Knight (2004), delivery is a narrower concept, referring to the provision of educational courses and programs, whether domestically or internationally. This category encompasses offerings by traditional higher education institutions as well as new providers, such as

companies interested in the global delivery of their programs and services, often prioritizing delivery over the international or intercultural dimensions of campus life and functions. Thus, understanding the stages and dimensions of internationalization is paramount. Figure 1 presents a detailed model of internationalization in higher education systems in cognizance of Knight's (2004) definition of internationalization. This perspective supports the motivations underlying the first and second generations of internationalization among Japanese and Chinese universities while acknowledging the evolving complexities of internationalization and its broader role in promoting global awareness, intercultural understanding, and international collaboration to address shared global challenges. Additionally, the model highlights the importance of integration and alignment with institutional goals and objectives to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of internationalization efforts.

The assumptions of internationalization offer insights into the rationales for internationalization within Asian HEIs. As Knight (2004) rightly pointed out, the rationales propelling internationalization differ significantly from one institution to another, from government department to government department, from stakeholder to stakeholder, and from country to country. These varying and sometimes conflicting rationales contribute to the complexity of the international dimension of education. However, they also underscore the substantial contributions that internationalization can make. Chan and Dimmock (2008) demonstrated that the characteristics of different universities, such as a British international university and a Chinese university, influence their motivations for internationalization. For the British university, internationalization serves to enhance its reputation on the global stage, whereas the Chinese university aims to contribute to its homeland through internationalization efforts (Li & Xue, 2022). Similarly, in the work of Horta (2009) on the internationalization of a national research-intensive HEI and a world leading HEI, it observes that the former aims to bolster its student population, while the latter focuses on elevating its global status and attracting talent to maintain its exceptional quality.

In their classic work, Seeber et al. (2016) examined the rationales for internationalization among HEIs, identifying factors operating at the environmental, organizational, and intra-organizational levels. Their analysis drew on a large-scale survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) and two extensive datasets documenting the organizational characteristics of European HEIs: the European Micro Data Collection (EUMIDA) and the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER). According to Seeber et al. (2016), the environmental level pertains to the global and national contexts in which HEIs operate. The organizational level refers to the goals of the HEI itself, while the intra-organizational level focuses on the roles played by various internal actors in the processes of internationalization. These rationales for internationalization are similar to those of HEIs in China and Japan, such as Nanjing University, Peking University, Kyoto University, and the University of Tokyo. Drawing on the multilevel framework proposed by Seeber et al. (2016), we examine three interconnected levels of internationalization— environmental, organizational, and intra-organizational.

***Environmental Level***

The environmental level is shaped by institutional forces, as legitimacy, competition for resources, status, and reputation serve as significant drivers of organizational decisions and underlying rationales for action. Marginson (2006) illustrated the importance of environmental factors in shaping the strategic goals and priorities of HEIs, particularly the growing influence of globalization, international competition, institutional prestige, global university rankings, and the pursuit of academic and research excellence. These factors increasingly encourage universities to compete for international students, talented faculty, research funding, and recognition within the global higher education landscape. Within this framework, HEIs seek to position themselves strategically within both global and national contexts while responding to changing expectations surrounding internationalization (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023). However, the nature and intensity of these competitive and institutional pressures vary considerably depending on universities' geographic locations, cultural environments, national policy priorities, and socioeconomic conditions (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). At HEIs, these pressures can impact everything from resource utilization to curriculum development and research activities. So, for HEIs to do their jobs well and stay important in a world that is becoming more connected, they need to understand and deal with these environmental factors. Within the environmental context of HEIs, Seeber et al. (2016) proposed two macro-level hypotheses, which are:

Macro-level Hypothesis 1: This hypothesis suggests that preferences for specific rationales for internationalization are influenced by the higher education system in which an HEI is situated. This influence stems from differences in institutional pressures and available resources within each higher education system. Essentially, the structure, policies, and priorities of the national or regional higher education system shape how HEIs perceive and pursue internationalization (Seeber et al., 2016).

Macro-level Hypothesis 2: This hypothesis posits that HEIs located in higher education systems characterized by strong competition for resources are more inclined to adopt an economic rationale for internationalization. In environments where resources are scarce or fiercely contested, HEIs may prioritize internationalization strategies that bring in revenue, attract talent, or enhance their competitive position in the global higher education market (Seeber et al., 2016).

These hypotheses underscore the complicated relationship among institutional contexts, institutional goals, and external pressures in shaping the internationalization strategies of HEIs. They suggest that the broader higher education landscape, including national policies, funding mechanisms, and cultural norms, significantly influences how HEIs conceptualize and operationalize internationalization.

***Organizational level***

According to Oliver, as cited in (Seeber et al. 2016), institutional and competitive pressures are not passively absorbed by HEIs. Instead, organizations may strategically decouple, and these pressures may sometimes conflict with organizational goals. At the organizational level, internationalization tends to align either with research and scientific production or with teaching. Within the organizational context of HEIs, Seeber et al. (2016) proposed three meso-level hypotheses, namely:

Meso-level Hypothesis 1: This hypothesis suggests that private for-profit HEIs are more inclined to adopt an economic rationale for internationalization. Private for-profit institutions often face distinct pressures related to revenue generation and market competition, which may lead them to prioritize internationalization strategies that yield financial benefits, such as attracting international students or establishing lucrative partnerships.

Meso-level Hypothesis 2: This hypothesis posits that HEIs oriented towards research activity are more likely to adopt a rationale for internationalization consistent with these activities. This includes strengthening institutional research and knowledge production capacity. Such postsecondary institutions are less likely to prioritize rationales related to benefits for teaching and students, as their primary focus is on advancing research excellence.

Meso-level Hypothesis 3: This hypothesis suggests that teaching-oriented HEIs are more likely to adopt rationales for internationalization that emphasize benefits for teaching and students. These rationales may include increased international awareness or deeper engagement with global issues among students. It also includes the enhanced internationalization of the curriculum to incorporate diverse perspectives and global competencies. Exposure to international best practices and pedagogical approaches enhances the quality of teaching and learning. Teaching-oriented HEIs prioritize educational outcomes and pedagogical excellence, viewing internationalization as a means to enrich the educational experience for their students and enhance teaching quality within their institutions.

Thus, these three meso-level hypotheses underscore how institutional characteristics, strategic priorities, and academic missions shape the rationales for internationalization among HEIs. They suggest that institutions pursue internationalization differently depending on whether their primary objectives emphasize economic competitiveness, research excellence and knowledge production, or enhanced teaching and student learning experiences (Seeber et al., 2016).

***Intra-organizational level***

At the intra-organizational level, internal groups within HEIs drive internationalization efforts by making compelling demands. Seeber et al. (2016) argue that internal groups within these HEIs tend to assign and support different rationales for internationalization. The rationale adopted by the HEI reflects the relative influence of internal groups on the internationalization process. Using the micro-level hypothesis, Seeber et al. (2016) propose that an HEI's internationalization rationale reflects the influence of internal actors on the internationalization process. While variations in interests and views exist among members of the same group of actors, such as academics from different disciplines and middle managers with varying backgrounds in a postsecondary institution, it is reasonable to expect that differences regarding internationalization processes are greater between students, academics, middle managers, and institutional leaders than within these groups. Internal groups in postsecondary institutions tend to initiate large-scale objectives in internationalization efforts. These objectives often highlight the broad spectrum of internationalization and its importance in preparing students for global citizenship, enhancing teaching and learning outcomes, promoting academic collaboration, and fostering

international networking among faculty and researchers. By integrating these multilevel factors, Figure 2 provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how institutional, organizational, and individual factors interact to shape the rationales for internationalization in higher education. This framework highlights the complexity and dynamism of internationalization processes, suggesting that they require a nuanced approach that considers multiple levels of analysis.

## Part II: The first generation of internationalization in East Asian higher education

The first generation of internationalization in Asian higher education was characterized by an outward-looking East-to-West flow of talent, whereby governments and universities strategically sponsored promising students and faculty members to pursue advanced education, research training, and professional development in Western institutions as part of broader national modernization efforts (Altbach & Selvaratnam, 1989; Huang, 2007; Li & Xue, 2022; Kuroda et al., 2024). This historical pattern can be understood through Seeber et al.'s (2016) intra-organizational perspective, which emphasizes how internal institutional actors, including university leaders, faculty members, and administrators, influence the motivations and priorities underlying internationalization. In Japan and China, these actors helped translate national educational modernization goals into institutional practices through overseas academic mobility, faculty development, knowledge acquisition, and the adoption of international academic standards. Thus, the first generation of internationalization can be understood as an institutionally mediated process of knowledge acquisition and capacity building, in which internal academic priorities and national development objectives collectively shaped the early internationalization trajectories of Japanese and Chinese universities.

Emerging largely in the post-World War II period and extending into the first decade of the twenty-first century, this phase of internationalization was driven by national aspirations to modernize higher education systems, accelerate scientific and technological advancement, and strengthen economic competitiveness through the acquisition of global knowledge and expertise (Guo et al., 2022; Kuroda et al., 2024). Rather than emphasizing reciprocal partnerships or global institutional positioning, the primary objective of this first generation of internationalization was knowledge acquisition and institutional capacity building through the adoption of Western educational models, academic norms, and research practices (Altbach & Selvaratnam, 1989; Huang, 2007; Mok, 2007).

Huang (2007) provided important historical insight into the origins of internationalization in Asia, particularly in China and Japan, arguing that its roots can be traced back to the latter part of the nineteenth century. Although internationalization is often portrayed as a contemporary phenomenon associated with globalization, many Asian countries had already begun modernizing their higher education systems by sponsoring students and academics to pursue advanced study and research abroad. China and Japan exemplify this early phase of internationalization (Huang, 2007; Li & Xue, 2022). While both countries selectively adopted foreign academic models and institutional practices, they simultaneously preserved significant elements of their national educational traditions and curricular

autonomy. Consequently, the early internationalization of higher education in Asia was largely characterized by a one-way transfer of Western knowledge, academic standards, and institutional practices, which profoundly shaped the subsequent evolution of higher education systems across the region (Huang, 2007; Ren & Wang, 2022). Thus, understanding this historical trajectory is essential because it demonstrates that internationalization in Asia long predates contemporary globalization and reflects a sustained commitment to educational modernization through international engagement. This first generation laid the institutional and intellectual foundations upon which later forms of internationalization—including strategic global partnerships, research collaboration, international rankings, and the contemporary wave of internationalization—would emerge. Recognizing these historical developments provides an important context for examining not only what internationalization is, but also who defines it and for what purposes.

## Part III: The second generation of internationalization in East Asian higher education

Building upon Knight's (2004) foundational conceptualization of internationalization and Seeber et al.'s (2016) multilevel framework of internationalization rationales, we introduce a new conceptual lens, which we term the "second generation of internationalization in higher education." We conceptualize this second generation as a strategic and institutionally driven phase in which universities move beyond predominantly outward academic mobility and knowledge acquisition toward deliberate efforts to strengthen global competitiveness, institutional reputation, international research collaboration, and societal engagement. As illustrated in Figure 3 in our conceptual framework, this generation is characterized by three interconnected dimensions: global knowledge co-creation and innovation, socioeconomic competitiveness and talent circulation, and cultural diplomacy and global citizenship education. These dimensions are supported by six interrelated drivers: research, international collaboration, intercultural dialogue, global talent development, civic responsibility, and soft power, which collectively contribute to strategic global engagement for educational excellence. In Japan, these priorities are reflected in government-supported internationalization initiatives, including the Global 30 Project and Top Global University Project, alongside the expansion of English-medium instruction, international academic recruitment, cross-border research partnerships, and institutional efforts to strengthen intercultural engagement and global visibility (Yoshida, 2016; Chen, 2026; Entrich, 2026; Bengü et al., 2026). Similarly, China's internationalization strategies increasingly emphasize world-class university development, international talent recruitment, academic collaboration, and the circulation of globally trained scholars, reflecting the relationship between national development priorities, institutional competitiveness, and international educational partnerships (LeBeau & Zhang, 2022; Si, 2026; Mei & Feng, 2026). Consequently, these developments illustrate how internationalization extends beyond conventional academic exchanges to encompass research innovation, knowledge co-creation, global talent circulation, intercultural dialogue, educational diplomacy, and broader societal contributions. Thus, we argue that the second generation of internationalization represents a multidimensional institutional strategy through which universities pursue strategic global engagement for educational excellence, while

navigating the opportunities, inequalities, and institutional tensions associated with an increasingly interconnected global higher education landscape.

We interrogate the second generation of internationalization to highlight the paradigmatic shift in higher education internationalization in contemporary times. Unlike earlier rationales articulated by Knight (2004), which largely emphasized academic, cultural, political, and economic motivations at national and regional levels, contemporary internationalization as shown in Figure 3 is increasingly anchored in universities' aspirations to position themselves as global actors within an interconnected educational ecosystem (Buckner, 2019; Zapp, et al., 2021; Lee & Ramirez, 2023). This change shows a strategic shift: universities are no longer just extending their institutional antennae to participate in transnational exchanges; they are actively trying to become globally recognized centers of excellence. Institutions in Asia (e.g., China, South Korea, and Japan) and the United States are expanding beyond community, state, or national rationales toward global landscapes where international rankings, brand recognition, and visibility play critical roles in shaping strategic decisions. As such, the second generation is not simply about mobility or partnership; it is about attracting world-class faculty and students, securing competitive research funding, and maintaining prestigious international classification statuses that align with global and regional ranking systems (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Montesinos et al., 2008; Buckner, et al., 2021; Ruano-Borbalan, 2024).

The desire to join global research networks, make institutions more competitive, and use cultural diplomacy and global citizenship education to increase soft power is what drives this second-generation agenda. While Chinese and Japanese universities may continue to serve their local and regional communities, a global orientation has become a strategic imperative—one that seeks to co-construct the global educational ecosystem through knowledge production, talent circulation, and intercultural engagement (Marginson, 2022; Hudzik, 2022; Cai & Leask, 2026). This contemporary rationale underscores that internationalization is no longer peripheral; rather, it is embedded at the heart of institutional identity and strategy, shaping how universities imagine their futures in a globalized knowledge economy.

At the intersection of these domains lies the intentionality of strategic global engagement for educational excellence, which encapsulates the contemporary goals of universities as they internationalize—not merely to exchange knowledge, but to actively shape and co-construct the global educational ecosystem (Cai & Ahmad, 2023; Cai & Leask, 2026). Chinese and Japanese universities are working to create collaborative, transnational research networks and produce knowledge together to solve important global problems like climate change, artificial intelligence, and sustainability. Socioeconomic competitiveness and talent circulation highlight the motivations of nations and HEIs to attract global talent, strengthen workforce capacities, and advance innovation and prestige (Knight, 2018; Cai et al., 2020; de Wit, 2020; Kapfudzaruwa, 2025). Finally, cultural diplomacy and global citizenship education embody the strategic use of higher education as a tool for soft power, intercultural dialogue, and civic responsibility in an increasingly interconnected world. Universities demonstrate this important strategy as a global player—positioning themselves to contribute to the betterment of the

global society as part of their civic responsibility. This involves actively addressing pressing societal challenges such as floods, droughts, and the broader impacts of climate change. This orientation aligns with the vision of Brandenburg et al. (2019), who advocate for a realignment of internationalization efforts toward an “internationalization of higher education for society.” This perspective extends the purpose of internationalization beyond institutional prestige and the benefits accruing to students and staff, emphasizing intentional contributions to the well-being of communities at home and abroad (Brandenburg et al., 2019).

The second generation of internationalizing higher education has also become increasingly visible in the activities of Chinese universities’ efforts to establish Chinese language institutions, such as Confucius Institutes, across African countries, including Malawi. The Kamuzu University of Health Science (KUHeS) now has a purpose-built Confucius Institute complex that makes it easier to teach Chinese formally, have cross-cultural exchanges, and do academic work (University of Malawi, 2026). Speaking at the inauguration ceremony of the complex, Minister of Higher Education Dr. Kabwila shared, “The Confucius Institute in Malawi was established with an aim to strengthen educational and cultural ties between Malawi and China, with a special focus on promoting Chinese language learning and cultural understanding” (University of Malawi, 2026). Such initiatives signal a deliberate effort to internationalize by extending linguistic and cultural influence while enabling Malawian students and professionals to better engage linguistically with Chinese nationals in diplomacy and global trade. This approach contributes to the argument we are making in this paper that the second generation’s goal also seeks to increase cultural exchange through education for the purpose of gaining soft power.

## Part IV: Internationalization of curriculums through EMI in Japanese higher education

In Japan, the concept of internationalization takes a unique perspective, particularly within the realm of higher education. The process of internationalizing higher education has begun to significantly impact Japan's educational system, presenting new meanings and challenges (Ota, 2016). It plays a pivotal role in both academic and social progress, all the while preserving its rich traditional culture and national identity. In recent times, various policies have been introduced by the government, universities, and industries aimed at attracting a diverse pool of students and top-tier researchers from Asia and beyond (Tsuruta, 2013). These initiatives are geared towards fostering greater exchange and collaboration, promoting internationalization within the country, and facilitating the development of a globally competitive human resource pool (Yoshida, 2016; Shimauchi, 2018). As a non-English-speaking, non-Western, and non-postcolonial Asian nation, Japan approaches this phase of internationalization with a distinct viewpoint, particularly regarding English imperialism (Shimauchi, 2018). Shimauchi (2018) noted that Japan has encountered both internal and external factors propelling the "English-ization" of its higher education system. As pointed out by Shimauchi (2018), internal factors include the strategic push by Japanese universities to elevate their global profiles, attract a more diverse body of international students, and modernize teaching practices to meet emerging workforce needs. Many Japanese

universities view EMI as a pathway to internationalization, academic competitiveness, and curricular innovation—a trend highlighted in studies showing how EMI is used to reform teaching and enhance institutional global standing (Hashimoto, 2013; Leong, 2017; Rose & McKinley, 2018). Externally, factors such as globalization, international labor market competition, and state-driven policy incentives encouraging cross-border academic mobility have accelerated the adoption of EMI (Shimauchi et al., 2018; Rose & McKinley, 2018). These external influences stem in part from broader national concerns about economic competitiveness and Japan's positioning in a rapidly globalizing knowledge economy (Aspinall, 2012; Murata, et al., 2019).

One pivotal international factor is the rise in global student mobility (Shimauchi, 2018). Despite being an economic powerhouse located in a non-Western region, Japan has traditionally attracted international students, especially from Asia (Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2020). Similarly, the decreasing number of domestic students viewing EMI as both a promotional tool and a way to experience international education domestically and the necessity for global human resources proficient in English are significant factors driving the internationalization process in Japanese higher education (Yonezawa, 2014; Shimauchi, 2018). Every HEI aims to internationalize, often starting by devising strategies to execute their internationalization policies. Therefore, the factors prompting the implementation of EMI in Japanese universities, classified as either internal (domestic) or external (global), encompass intercultural, international, and global dimensions as conceptualized in Knight's (2004) definition of internalization.

Driven by the demand for a globally competitive workforce, Japan's government policies heavily support international efforts within the country's higher education landscape (Tsuruta, 2013; Ota, 2018; Shimauchi, 2018). Initiatives like the Global 30 Project (started in 2009), the Project for the Promotion of Global Human Resource Development (launched in 2012), and the Top Global University Project (commenced in 2014) have been instrumental in moving these higher education policies forward. These programs enable designated universities to offer English-Medium Degree Programs (EMDPs), aligning with global standards and enhancing competitiveness. However, as noted by Shimauchi (2018), this focus on elite institutions exacerbates disparities among Japanese universities. The top-down approach to internationalization, driven by national policies, aims to bolster the competitiveness of the nation's universities and attract global talent. Elite universities view this emphasis on English-language curriculum as a form of Japanese soft power diplomacy (Murata et al., 2019).

Shimauchi (2017) highlighted how international education, particularly through Japanese studies, serves as a tool for disseminating Japanese values globally. Emerging international liberal arts programs in EMI expose international students to Japan-related content and cultivate domestic students as "global human resources" with a distinct Japanese identity. Thus, these internal ambitions and external expectations illustrate how Japan's higher education system is continually negotiating its role in an interconnected global landscape (Buckner, et al., 2021).

The role of EMI in Japan's higher education internationalization exhibits a fundamental dichotomy. Knight's (2004) classification of internationalization activities into "internationalization abroad" and "internationalization at home" proves useful. Shimauchi (2018) categorizes internationalization activities in Japan within the framework provided by Knight's classification. In the Japanese context, "internationalization abroad" includes efforts to promote "Japan" worldwide, while "internationalization at home" refers to Japan's internal transformations to meet global demands.

As Shimauchi (2018) explained, Japan's internationalization agenda in higher education is shaped by a dual vision: projecting Japanese language, culture, and academic values globally while simultaneously transforming domestic higher education institutions to meet international standards. This twofold commitment reflects Japan's broader goal of cultivating globally competitive human resources capable of thriving in multicultural environments and representing Japan abroad. Scholars note that this outward-facing and inward-facing approach is consistent with national policy efforts aimed at strengthening Japan's global presence through academic exchanges, student mobility, and the international promotion of Japanese culture (Yonezawa, 2014). At the same time, the internal dimension of internationalization—particularly the expansion of EMI—aligns with institutional efforts to internationalize campus environments, diversify student populations, and enhance English proficiency among faculty and students (Yamamoto, 2018). Additionally, Japan's emphasis on global human resource development reflects economic and geopolitical pressures to remain competitive within a rapidly globalizing knowledge economy, positioning EMI as a strategic tool for both national development and higher education reform (Aspinall, 2013; Yamamoto, 2018). Hence, these perspectives support Shimauchi's (2018) argument that internationalization in Japan operates through complementary external and internal channels designed to elevate Japan's global engagement while transforming learning environments at home.

# Part V: Internationalization experiences in Chinese higher education

Chen and Huang (2013) argued that internationalization efforts in China date back to the ample evidence of the multiplicity of nationalities among Confucius's students and that internationalization experiences in China witnessed two notable phases. The two phases illustrate the evolution of China's policy concerning the internationalization of higher education, which reflects significant shifts in priorities and strategies over the past two decades. During the first phase, from 1978 to 1992, China's focus was primarily on addressing the urgent need for professionals and experts with advanced knowledge and technology (Huang, 2003, 2007; Wang, 2008). This period was characterized by efforts to send students, scholars, and faculty abroad for advanced studies, inviting foreign scholars and experts to China, and promoting the teaching and learning of foreign languages, particularly English. These initiatives were driven partly by China's isolation from the Western world following the Korean War and its subsequent desire to catch up with developments in advanced countries.

The second phase, starting from 1993 to the present, saw a shift in focus towards addressing new challenges and opportunities arising from increased global mobility and the internationalization of higher

education (Huang, 2003; Li & Xue, 2022). With growing numbers of Chinese scholars, faculty members, and students studying abroad, attention turned towards encouraging their return, attracting foreign students to study in China, and promoting transnational education and internationalization of university curricula. Key policy documents and speeches, such as those issued by the State Education Commission (SEC) and the then Minister of Education Ms. Chen, had a major influence on the direction of Chinese higher education policy (Huang, 2003; Li & Xue, 2022). These initiatives aim to promote cooperation and joint operations between Chinese and foreign institutions, as well as open China's education system to the world more widely and actively. The transformation of Chinese higher education from an elitist system to one focused on massification reflects broader societal goals of promoting social equity, strengthening national competitiveness, and achieving national development objectives (Huang, 2003, 2007). This shift has led to significant expansions in enrollment, providing millions of young people with access to higher education and contributing to the nation's goals of creating a well-off, harmonious, and innovative society (Huang, 2007). Still, other scholars argue that this enrollment expansion in Chinese higher education institutions should not be mistaken as a characterization of pure public good due to such institutions' selective nature (Tian & Liu, 2018). However, that does not detract China from the internationalization rationales in higher education institutions which aim to achieve objectives such as:

1. Deeper engagement with global issues by students: This involves preparing students to work effectively in foreign and culturally diverse environments, enhancing their global awareness and intercultural competencies (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Li & Xue, 2022).

2. Improved quality of teaching and learning: Internationalization contributes to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning within HEIs by exposing students and faculty to diverse perspectives and innovative pedagogical approaches (Hudson, 2016; Shimauchi, 2018).

3. Adjustment of curricula to international standards: Internationalization enables HEIs to align their curricula with international benchmarks and standards, ensuring that graduates are equipped with globally relevant knowledge and skills (Cai et al., 2020; de Wit, 2020).

4. International cooperation and capacity building: Internationalization facilitates collaboration between HEIs across national boundaries, leading to mutual capacity building, knowledge exchange, and research collaboration (Shimauchi, 2018).

5. International networking by faculty and researchers: Internationalization fosters networking opportunities for faculty and researchers, allowing them to establish connections, share expertise, and collaborate on research projects across geographical boundaries and nation-states (Hudzik, 2022; Cai & Leask, 2026).

## Part VI: Implications for policy direction & conclusion

Indeed, the evolution of internationalization has been accompanied by shifts in meanings, rationales, and approaches, all within the changing global context. However, the foundational aspects of studying

internationalization have remained relatively consistent. Despite the broadening of the concept and the emergence of new rationales, approaches, and strategies as noted in Knight (2004), the fundamental principles underlying the study of internationalization have endured over time. These foundational principles often include understanding the interconnectedness of nations, cultures, economies, and societies, as well as recognizing the importance of cross-border interactions, cooperation, and exchange. The internationalization efforts of HEIs in Japan and China have reinforced this. Moreover, scholars and practitioners continue to explore how internationalization manifests in various sectors and contexts, such as education, business, politics, and culture.

While the specifics of internationalization may vary across different disciplines and fields, as seen in Japan and China, the core questions and concerns remain centered on how individuals, organizations, and nations engage with the global community, adapt to changing dynamics, and navigate the complexities of an interconnected world. Therefore, while the concept of internationalization has indeed become broad and also a conscientious pursuit of excellence, its study still relies on foundational principles that emphasize understanding, adaptation, and collaboration in a constantly changing global landscape. Knight and de Wit (2018) observe a significant shift in the drivers behind national policies related to the internationalization of higher education. The scholars pointed out that economic and political rationales are becoming increasingly prominent, reflecting the growing emphasis on global competitiveness, economic development, and geopolitical influence. Economic motivations often include attracting international students for tuition revenue, fostering research collaboration for innovation and knowledge transfer, and enhancing the international reputation of universities to attract investment and talent, which have characterized the internationalization efforts of notable postsecondary institutions in China, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Sun Yat-sen University, to name a few.

Political rationales may involve diplomatic objectives, soft power projection, and fostering international partnerships for mutual benefits. This is why the Chinese government's support for students to pursue studies abroad in nations such as the US, UK, and Europe serves a comprehensive agenda of nurturing talent and repatriating valuable expertise and knowledge to bolster China's progress (Huang, 2003, 2007). Upon their return, these students typically bring back advanced technical competencies, a nuanced grasp of cross-cultural dynamics, and extensive international connections, all of which can substantially enrich Chinese universities and industries. Equally, the introduction of EMI education in Japan has primarily been promoted at the national level through policies aimed at boosting the enrollment of international students. The goal is to break down linguistic barriers and foster a workforce that is both globally aware and competitive. At the institutional level, Japanese universities have a specific and strategic outlook, viewing EMI programs as a means of marketing and revenue generation.

We argue that the second generation of internationalization in higher education in China and Japan is to improve their educational environments and make it easier for people from different cultures and political backgrounds to work together and share ideas. The implication of the Chinese government's sponsorship of students to study abroad is that it aims to strategically invest in human capital

development. By sending students overseas to acquire advanced skills and knowledge, the government anticipates a return on this investment in the form of a more skilled workforce and enhanced capabilities within Chinese universities and industries. Additionally, it suggests a recognition of the importance of international exposure and cross-cultural understanding in fostering innovation and competitiveness on a global scale. Therefore, policy directions on internationalization in China and Japan's higher education settings need to address sustainability and internationalizing curriculum and faculty with the aim of broadening international research and teaching. These aspects are crucial indicators for international accreditations and rankings of higher education institutions.

The implementation of EMI programs reflects a commitment to the second generation of internationalization, which is often taken into account by accrediting bodies and ranking organizations. Factors such as the presence of foreign language programs, including graduate-level programs offered in English; international student enrollment; faculty diversity; and research collaboration across borders contribute significantly to an institution's standing in global rankings and accreditation assessments, which Japanese and Chinese postsecondary institutions—the University of Tokyo and China Agricultural University, for example have been exploring since the inception of the internationalization agenda. Therefore, effectively integrating EMI into the educational system can enhance the international reputation and prestige of HEIs in Asia, further bolstering their recognition and competitiveness on the global stage. Moreover, such integration will require the need to establish the political determination to cultivate leadership within HEIs possessing robust, multidisciplinary academic credentials, proficient language skills, and substantial administrative leadership experience.

The second generation of the internationalization framework presents significant policy implications, as it depicts that HEIs are no longer engaging in internationalization as a peripheral activity but as a strategic core mission. HEIs across Japan and China increasingly recognize internationalization as an avenue to advance global research networks and teaching, strengthen economic competitiveness, and foster intercultural understanding. The second generation aligns institutional strategies with global agendas for innovation, workforce mobility, and civic engagement. As a forward-looking framework, it provides guidance for universities in policy design, institutional strategic planning, and global engagement initiatives through the exchange of students, faculty, and knowledge. It represents a paradigmatic shift from earlier motivations toward a more intentional, strategically engaged and a globally responsive higher education landscape.

The second generation of internationalization is no longer just an extra activity for institutions; it is now a core mission that is part of national and institutional plans. In China, top universities such as Tsinghua University and Peking University have moved beyond traditional rationales of internationalization centered on student and faculty mobility to adopt strategic approaches that link global engagement with research excellence, innovation networks, and societal impact through civic engagement. Similarly, in Japan, institutions such as the University of Tokyo and the University of Tsukuba explicitly frame their international strategies as efforts to contribute to global knowledge production and address shared societal challenges through transnational collaboration. These developments demonstrate how

internationalization is increasingly integrated into broader institutional missions and national strategies, positioning universities as key global actors shaping research, innovation, and international cooperation (Sangroula, n.d; University of Tokyo, n.d; Li & Xue 2022; Chen, 2026).

Effective engagement with an international audience necessitates a profound comprehension of both the national cultural identities and the overarching motivations driving participation in the global arena. Policy initiatives must prioritize the allocation of sufficient funding to facilitate the comprehensive management of the internationalization process in a postsecondary institution interested in internationalizing, ensuring its progression towards achieving its intended objectives, functionality, and successful implementation. The second-generation rationale for internationalization of any postsecondary institutions aspiring to internationalize should encompass both specific objectives and broader goals, including the competency of institutions to effectively engage both locally and globally with counterpart institutions in matters of teaching and research. This approach should serve as a strategic policy aimed at achieving educational excellence in both teaching and research, while simultaneously exerting a significant influence within the globalized academic community.

## Declarations

# Author Contribution

Author Contributions: Nwaka developed the Introduction and Parts II and III, focusing on the first and second generations of internationalization in East Asian higher education and the proposed conceptual framework. Kaunda developed Parts I, V, and VI, examining the rationales for internationalization, experiences in Chinese higher education, and implications for higher education policy and practice. Both authors collaboratively compiled, reviewed, and refined the references and contributed to the overall development of the manuscript.

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# Figures




**Figure 1**

**Models of Internationalization**

**Note**: Adapted from "Internationalization Remodeled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales", by Knight (2004), Journal of Studies in International Education, 8(1), 5–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303260832

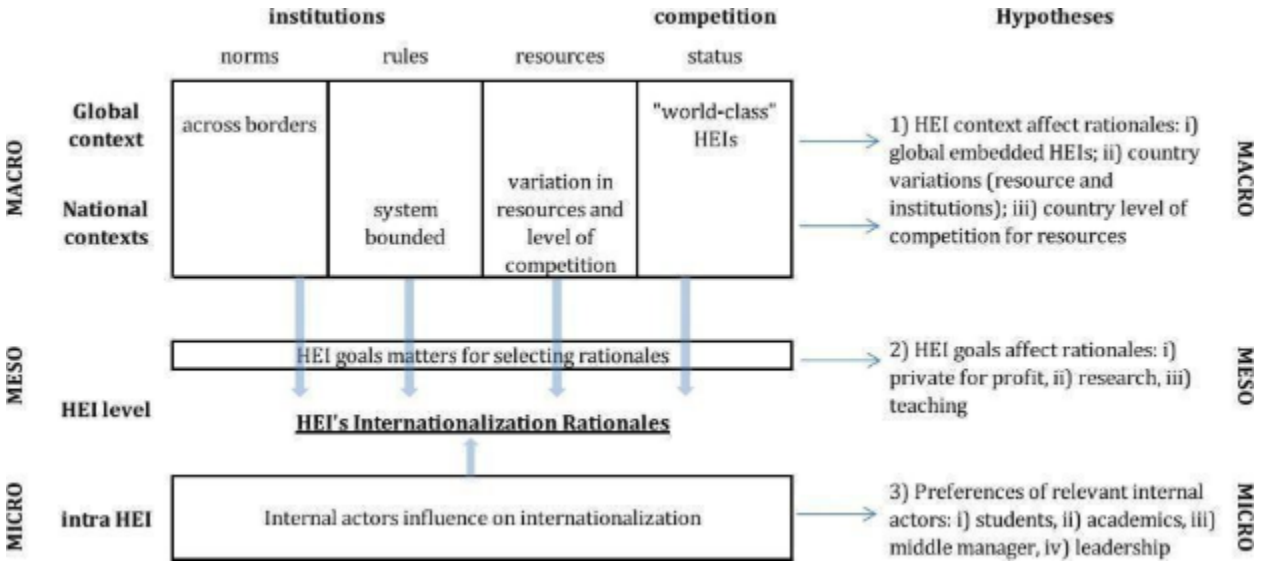


**Figure 2**

**Multilevel antecedents of internationalization rationales**

**Note**: Reprinted from "Why do Higher Education Institutions Internationalize? An Investigation of the Multilevel Determinants of Internationalization Rationales", by Seeber, M., Cattaneo, M., Huisman, J., & Paleari, S., 2016, Higher Education, 72(5), p. 691. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9971-x

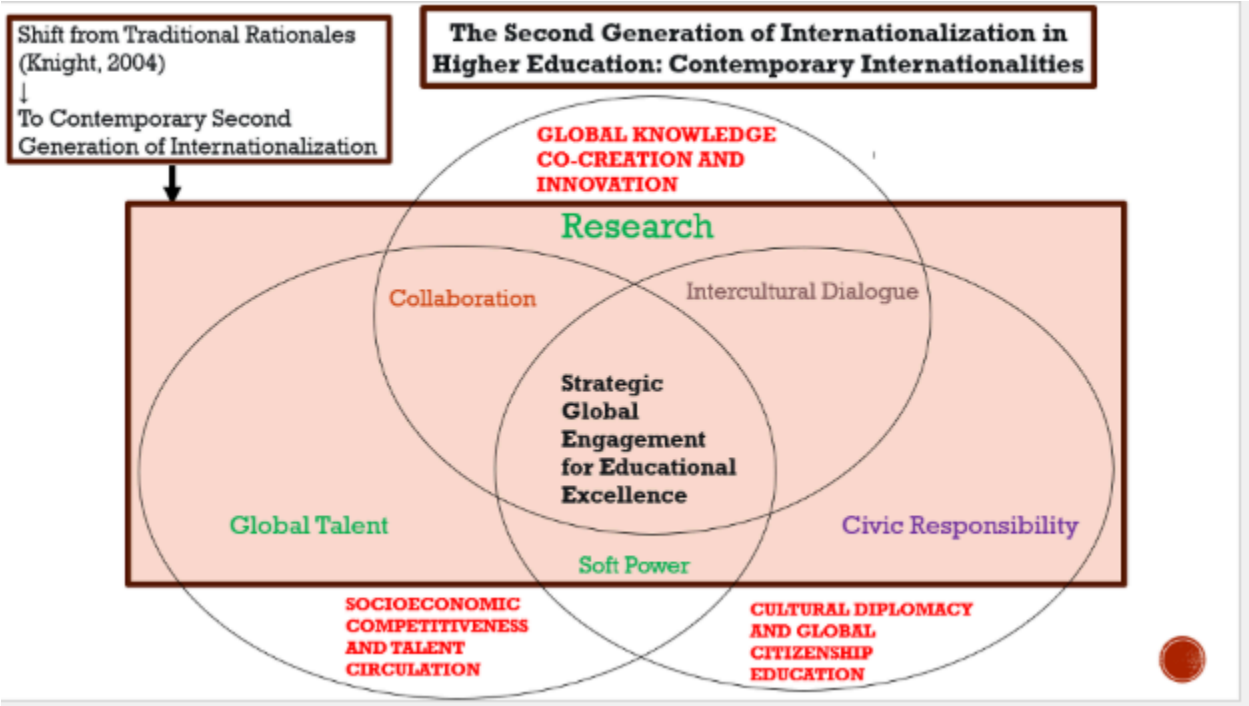


Figure 3

**The second generation of internationalization: contemporary intentionalities.**