Development and Quality of Higher Education in Transnational Co-operation: Some Cases from China, Japan, Malaysia

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1. Introduction

In the process of globalisation, traditional patterns of development in any area of human society (from politics, economics and culture to education, which take place within national territories) have been altered, allowing for increasing conditions of exchange and cooperation on a worldwide scale [1]. This has led to the creation of international networks of governments and organisations (including universities), creating a situation in which cross-border cooperation is enhanced and appropriate supra-regional governance models are developed.

According to UNESCO’s definition, transnational cooperative education refers to institutional cooperation between the country where the student is located and the country where the degree-granting institution is located. There are seven types of collaboration: transnational branches, franchising (transnational partner institutions), linking, training, institutional projects, distance learning projects and study abroad [2]. This dissertation will focus on transnational collaborations within higher education (TNHE) and concentrate on enterprises of a collaborative nature, i.e. transnational higher education institutions (THEI), including a mix of branches and franchises (co-founded institutions).

At the national level, many governments are keen to
encourage the development of TNHE as an opportunity to expand national higher education capacity, which can be lucrative in terms of public budgets. For THEI importing countries, this upgrading of higher education can reduce brain drain and form partnerships with exporting countries [3]. For exporting countries, the main driver of this situation is the budgetary pressure from an ageing society, which can be mitigated to some extent by activating higher education institutions in foreign education markets [4].

At the institutional level, THEI can enhance the experience and development of the higher education sector by introducing specialised programmes offered in developed countries. It brings economic benefits to the participating operating institutions and enhances the reputation of higher education institutions [5]. At the student levels, THEI is able to provide students with a higher quality education, allowing local students who wish to increase their international knowledge and practice in a relatively inexpensive environment without having to leave their home country [6].

2. Strategies and Developments in Transnational Cooperative Higher Education in Selected Asian Countries (China, Japan, Malaysia)

Although transnational education has been around since the mid-20th century, until the 21st century it was mainly in the form of courses, programmes and distance learning offered by partners [7]. According to Hong’s explanation, THEI is divided into two forms of operation: THEI with independent legal personality and THEI without independent legal personality. These two different forms of THEI have many overlapping patterns of operation, although they have some differences in terms of laws and rights [8]. However, the independent legal personality of a THEI requires a better level of operation and resource conditions, as well as more freedom to manage and develop. This section focuses on the different national and regional strategies, institutional development and student well-being reflected in these differences in institutional nature.

2.1 Continued Reform and Opening up of China

Since the country’s opening-up policy in the 1980s, China has experienced rapid economic growth, but as the economy has risen, educational resources have been inadequate and the quality of education has varied. In this context, China has a vast market for education and TNHE has emerged as an attractive model that can help its higher education grow rapidly, with the opportunity to rapidly increase the strength of Chinese higher education. As of 2015, the Chinese government had approved over a thousand transnational cooperative education projects with the participation of 64 foreign higher education institutions [9].

However, Jiang argues that THEI in China still faces unequal development between disciplines and regions, that graduates in many disciplines face employment difficulties, and that THEI in China is almost exclusively established in cities with higher economic and educational levels, with the development of THEI in western regions being almost neglected [10].

Another Chinese region with impressive higher education achievements in Asia: Hong Kong, for historical reasons, became internationally connected early on. In the 1980s, at least 65% of Hong Kong’s higher education workers had experience of studying at foreign universities [11]. Hong Kong currently has no independent legal entity as a THEI, and there are 11 government-recognised universities with higher education degree awarding powers, all of which are public universities. In addition, the content of the local TNHE is more focused on supporting professional education that is closely related to the contemporary market to meet the manpower needs of the industry, such as marketing, nursing, business. Hong Kong places great importance on education as part of trade, especially with strict legislation on higher education, but they leave the evaluation of quality to the market by publicly listing the specific content of TNHE programmes and THEI for consumers to choose and identify [12].

2.2 Japan Reinventing Itself as a Higher Education Powerhouse

Japan’s stance on the subject of internationalisation of higher education differs in many ways than other Asian countries, as Japan, one of the first developed countries in Asia, has a track record of internationalising higher education from the modern era [13]. After the Second World War, the Japanese government does not seem to have stagnated in internationalising higher education, continuing to establish programs to invite international students to revive and develop international cultural exchange, and this environment of accepting international students continued and expanded for decades, while it also held the status of a THEI exporter.

However, in the post-21st century, although many international students still attend school in Japan, the number of international students has been declining since 2004 due to the devastation of the economic crisis [14]. In addition to this, in the late 1990s the concept of “World Class Universities” (WCUs) became popular in various countries, prompting the Japanese government to make some hasty internationalisation moves in 2004 in an at-
tempt to establish more WCUs to restore the international status of higher education. During this period, the Department of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) has developed a different approval system for THEI than before, including the fact that from 2004, credits and diplomas awarded to THEI exported from Japan were equal to those awarded to domestic universities, and that THEI operating in Japan were on par with domestic higher education institutions of the same level [15].

Since 2004, the Japanese government has attempted to set specific targets in terms of TNHE development strategies. 2009 saw the launch of the Global 30 Project, in which the government supported three Japanese universities to provide low tuition fees, scholarships and state-of-the-art academic facilities for international students and teachers. Shortly thereafter, the MEXT again launched a funding programme called “Re-Creating Japan” to ensure the quality of credit accreditation and administration of TNHE programmes through a series of measures, and to establish and fund collaborative projects with higher education institutions in other countries to develop output programmes and conduct input programmes [16].

2.3 Malaysian Higher Education in Pursuit of International Status

Malaysia has always focused on the development of education, but as a young country, it has had about 30% foreign immigrants since its official independence in 1957. In order to safeguard the national interest from encroachment, the government imposed state protectionism on the Malay community, thus providing more resources and better treatment for the Malay community [17]. As policy and financial support for higher education in Malaysia had long been biased in favour of the Malay community, non-Malay students had little access to public universities and increasingly chose to study abroad, leading to a significant loss of foreign exchange and brain drain in the 1980s when the number of students studying abroad exceeded the number studying at home. As a result, the government recognised the need to liberalise higher education to meet domestic demand, with the underlying aim of weathering the economic crisis of the time [18]. In addition, Mazzarol et al. argue that the enactment of the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996 was the real beginning of the liberalisation of higher education in Malaysia. The Act allowed other countries to provide higher education to Malaysia and established more private higher education institutions.

It is worth mentioning, with regard to degrees, that Hu et al. commend Malaysia for pioneering in the 1980s a “dual system” of mutual recognition of credits and degrees between the two countries’ partner institutions, such as the “2+1” scheme, which involves two years of study in China followed by one year abroad to obtain a degree, as well as the “2+2” and “3+2” programmes. The “dual study” system was so popular with many students that it was introduced in many Asian countries and continues to be used today. In just a few decades of internationalisation of higher education, Malaysia has moved away from the regional protectionism of its early years and actively developed TNHE, and has now reached the stage of exporting higher education, with Malaysian higher education institutions opening many collaborative programmes and THEI abroad [19].

3. Legal, Policy and Quality Assurance Issues in TNHE and Other Challenges

3.1 Legal, Policy and Quality Assurance Challenges at National Level and Institutional Level

In most countries, the approval of TNHE is entirely determined by the government’s education department. On the approval form, the applicant institution or individual needs to submit their basic information, financial status, project interest, development plan and funding allocation to the education department [20]. In fact, the improvement of the law is an issue that both TNHE importing and exporting countries need to work on. The UK and the US are the two countries that receive the most international students and export the most higher education in the world. However, the US government is hardly involved in the assessment of these institutions, and transnational committees and even embassies usually collect information from transnational institutions, although they have a standardised process [21].

On the issue of how the state should set up specific functions in the operation of TNHE programmes and institutions, Wang argues that there should be a dedicated body to manage THEI, citing the example of the Private Higher Education Authority, which was established in Malaysia in 1996 specifically to manage private higher education institutions. The Authority’s function is not only to supervise, but also to provide advisory services to institutions and to promote the national education brand, which allows for more direct supervision and mutual assistance between the government and the institutions [22].

In addition, how THEI recruits highly qualified international teachers who are willing to work in other countries on a permanent basis, as well as recruiting teachers from the importing countries who are able to complete the relevant professional teaching, is a major challenge for the operation of the institution [23]. Not only this, but the low
level of foreign language proficiency and lack of interaction with the foreign teachers of many of the students involved in the programme leads to a lack of awareness of their course experience. This is caused by issues including funding, visa policies and the condition of THEI facilities [24].

3.2 Other Challenges Radiating from the Cooperation

3.2.1 Cultural Conflict Issues

Asia hosts by far the most THEI, and major sending countries such as the UK, US and Australia have significant cultural differences with Asian countries. Not only that, but they also have many different philosophies and models of business and educational approaches. As a result, many THEI will adapt some of their models to suit the local culture and educational habits after exporting to different countries. However, the question of how to adapt to meet the educational style and cultural atmosphere of the importing country while maintaining the characteristics of the exporting country is a difficult one, and if the THEI does not maintain its original model, the students’ experience and the quality of teaching may be reduced as a result.

Not only that, but many developing countries have experienced long periods of anti-invasion and anti-colonial struggles in their recent history. They have moved from post-independence conservatism to gradual openness driven by internationalisation, but many have maintained a cautious and resistant attitude towards other cultures and values, or regional protectionism [25], and this protection includes the field of education.

3.2.2 Inequalities in Regional Resource Distribution

As Lee notes, in some Asian countries, the management of higher education systems is controlled by a small elite [26]. If the institution is located in an economically developed, high-spending region (e.g., China), then THEI may charge higher tuition fees and many economically disadvantaged students are unable to access this model of education. When higher education is established with many commercialised profit and resource decisions in mind, it ultimately results in students from poor and remote areas not being able to set foot in higher education [27].

4. Conclusions

Under the influence of the internationalisation of higher education, almost every country has tried to harness the power of cooperation to improve its higher education strength and international standing through the favourable conditions of other countries and regions. However, there are also conservative attitudes in some developing countries that have experienced anti-invasion and anti-colonial struggles and understand the value of openness, but also the need to preserve the status and values of their traditional education, such as China [28]. It is no exaggeration to say that, at least in Asia, most countries, especially developing countries with the same background, have similar attitudes and trends towards the internationalisation of higher education.

Overall, the study provides a strong illustration of how national higher education is meeting inter-country and inter-regional cooperation and competition in the context of globalisation. However, this study calls on countries and higher education institutions to confront the issue of the quality of transnational education and the achievements available to students as primary consumers, and not to lose sight of the important functions and values that higher education should maintain in terms of academic research, cultural exchange and the promotion of human development.

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