

China's Strategy for Internationalization of Higher Education Following the Global Trend

Yan Deng

Received in November 2024 Yan Deng — PhD in International Studies, Faculty at School of Economics, Yunnan Normal University. Address: 768#, Ju Xian Street, Cheng Gong, Kunming. E-mail: dengyan@ynnu.edu.cn

Abstract In an interconnected and interdependent world, the IHE strategies of all states are shaping and being shaped by globalization and the emerging global IHE trend. China is a prominent player with massive mobility activities; therefore, it influences the global education landscape. This study examines China's IHE strategy in terms of its importance, focus, and purpose, as well as the policy coherence and ethical issues based on approaches to and rationales behind promoting IHE. It is based on a qualitative analysis of the Working Priority of the Ministry of Education of China and related policy documents. It was found that China adopted the "walking on two legs" strategy, with more outward orientation and awareness of local needs. Following the approaches frequently featured in the global trend, China also utilized a number of innovative methods. The IHE was not an end in China, but an intentional, systematic, and strategic means with certain challenges for national building.

Keywords Internationalization of higher education, strategy, approach, rationale, China

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1. Introduction The internationalization of higher education is a critical issue worldwide. The International Association of Universities¹ lists it as one of the strategic priorities of higher education. Its prominence is further upheld by the global ranking fever. The QS World University Ranking (QS Ranking) assesses a university's international branding in attracting international faculty, students, and international research networks². Similarly, the Times World University Ranking (THE Ranking) considers the international outlook, covering the proportion

¹ International Association of Universities. Thematic Priorities: <https://iau.global/priorities> (accessed 28.11.2025).

² QS World University Rankings: <https://support.qs.com/hc/en-gb/articles/4405955370898-QS-World-University-Rankings> (accessed 28.11.2025).

of international students and academic staff, as well as international collaborative publications³.

Since its “reform and opening up” in 1979, China has made tremendous economic achievements, which enabled the country to enhance its profile in global education. In 2021, more than 1.02 million Chinese tertiary students were studying abroad⁴. Meanwhile, the number of international students studying in China reached 492,185 in 2018⁵. China's endeavor in the internationalization of higher education (IHE) was evidenced by the global ranking of its universities. In the ranking of 2025, nine universities from mainland China were in the QS Ranking Top 200⁶ and thirteen in the Times Ranking Top 200⁷.

Globalization has created an interconnected and interdependent world [Knight, 2008] for the IHE. With rapid development over the past three decades, the IHE exhibits some common characteristics globally. Both globalization and IHE are shaping and being shaped by all countries' options. China is a prominent player in this process, with the government performing the leading role. Consequently, China's IHE policies not only direct the practice of its higher education institutions but also influence the global education landscape, especially in a world with increasing geopolitical tensions.

Scholars have studied China's IHE strategy quite thoroughly, primarily discussing it from the historical perspective. However, the national option along with the global trend from a globalization perspective needs more discussion. This study aims to examine China's IHE strategy in terms of its importance, focus, and purpose, as well as the policy coherence and ethical issues associated with its “means” and “end”. It is addressed by following two specific research questions:

- RQ1: What approaches did China employ to promote its IHE?
- RQ2: What were China's rationales to promote IHE?

This paper begins with a theoretical and analytic framework based on discussing the impact of globalization on education. After reviewing the existing literature on IHE strategy at global, global-South, and na-

³ World University Rankings 2025: methodology: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/world-university-rankings-2025-methodology> (accessed 28.11.2025).

⁴ China Daily (2024, March 16) China still leading source of foreign students: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202403/16/WS65f4e78ba31082fc043bcf71.html> (accessed 28.11.2025).

⁵ Ministry of Education (2019) Statistics on International Students Studying in China 2018: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201904/t20190412_377692.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

⁶ QS World University Rankings 2025: Top global universities: <https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings?region=Asia&countries=cn> (accessed 28.11.2025).

⁷ World University Rankings 2025: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2025/world-ranking> (accessed 28.11.2025).

tional levels, the research method is introduced, including a justification for the sample. Then, the findings of this study are presented and analyzed, which is followed by discussing the limitations, implications, and recommendations.

2. Theoretical and analytic framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on discussions of the impact of globalization on education. Globalization is an environmental factor having both positive and negative effects on education [Knight, 2005]. Portnoi [2016] compares two competing perspectives to discuss the above impact. The world culture theory assumes that the educations worldwide are working towards convergence, with best practices at the top and diffusing around the world. On the other hand, the culturalist approach acknowledges that globalization produces a global model of education, but casts doubt on the existence of the “best” practice, as various local contexts will mediate the impact of globalization.

The contradiction of world culturalism and culturalist approach reflects the tensions between the global and the local. Each state has its particular way for internationalization based on its rationales, goals, and expected outcomes [Knight, 2015]. Meanwhile, a global trend emerges from the national and institutional IHE strategies worldwide [De Wit et al., 2021].

To resolve the tensions between the local and the global, Nederveen Pieterse [2009] proposes the “culture mixing” approach. Being within the postmodern paradigm, it emphasizes integrating with the global without giving up its own cultural identity. It is an ongoing mixing process with ever-generating new commonalities and differences. As per the “culture mixing” approach, the outcome of globalization is open-ended, which can be a process of easternization as well as westernization.

This study adopted the culture mixing approach to analyze China's IHE strategy along with the global trend. The focus is neither on the particularity of China's local conditions, which mediate the global trends, nor on the power of the global trend to shape China's national choice. It focuses on “open-ended” outcomes of the impact of globalization on China's IHE strategy. These outcomes have been on-going and ever-generating; the emerging commonalities and differences are always novel and keep changing.

The analytic framework of this study acknowledged the argument of De Wit et al. [2015] that the IHE is rather a means than an end. Using the findings of De Wit & Altbach [2021] on the IHE global trends as a framework, this study analyzed the importance, focus, and purpose of IHE, the policy coherence, and ethical issues in China's IHE process. It is not for comparing or contrasting the local with the global, but presenting a national choice along with the global trend.

- 3. Literature review** This paper reviewed three types of literature on IHE. The first part covers the definition, rationales, and streams of IHE. Another one analyzes the global trend emerged from the development of higher education and IHE worldwide. The third group of publications deal with the previous findings on China's national strategies in internationalization.
- 3.1. Internationalization of higher education** This paper acknowledges that IHE is a means to an end. It is defined as "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society" [De Wit et al., 2015. P. 29]. The purposes listed in this definition are closely related to the functions of higher education, teaching, research, and the social good.
- Different rationales imply varying means and ends [De Wit, 2002]. The rationales at the national level [Knight, 2004] explain the state's purposes for IHE and the ways to achieve them. To build human capital, the human resource rationale covers attracting and retaining talented foreign students as well as developing domestic students through internationalizing teaching and research. The strategic alliance rationale suggests developing geopolitical and economic relationships through student and academics mobility and collaborative research and education, as well as obtaining a competitive edge from bilateral and regional cooperation. The commercial trade rationale seeks economic returns from education export. The nation-building rationale covers importing programs and institutions to boost the domestic education and receiving aid and assistance to fix the deficit in education resources. The social and cultural rationale looks to promote intercultural understanding and national cultural identity.
- IHE consists of two streams. The Internationalization at Home (IaH) refers to respective activities on the home campus without involving cross-border mobility, while Internationalization Abroad (IA) refers to the activities that happen abroad [Ibid.].
- The IA is also called cross-border education [Knight, 2003]. Its evolution involves the mobility of students and teachers (people mobility) as the first generation, program and institution (program and provider mobility) as the second, and the strategic mass mobility to construct an education hub (education hub) as the third [Knight, 2011]. Moreover, mobility is also extended to policy, which refers to quality assurance, qualification recognition, credit system, and similar areas. [Knight, 2012].
- 3.2. The global trend of IHE development** Over the 30 years of its advancement, the internationalization of higher education has brought about a number of global trends. They are summarized as characteristics of internationalization by De Wit &

Altbach [2021], which are related to its importance, focus, purpose, coherence, and ethics.

As for the importance attached to IHE, it gradually moved from a marginal position in higher education to the central one for over three decades [De Wit, 2019]. It used to be the priority of higher education institutions; currently it is an increasingly important agenda of national governments [Knight, De Wit, 2018]. Both developed and developing countries acknowledged IHE as a crucial factor in the progress of higher education [De Wit, 2020].

The focus of IHE has been on cross-border activities (IA) rather than those on home campus (IaH) [De Wit, Altbach, 2021]. As for the types of mobility, that of people, programs, providers, and polices drew more attention than the mobility of research, such as international co-authorship and other international research benchmarks [Knight, De Wit, 2018]. In the cross-border mobility of people, undergraduates were prioritized over graduates [Ibid.].

The purposes of IHE showed four trends. First, economic motives became more prominent among all other rationales [Ibid.]. IHE became an industry and source of revenue [De Wit, 2020]. Furthermore, economic and political rationales increasingly overtook the academic and cultural ones in national IHE policies [Knight, De Wit, 2018]. This was driven by national objectives related to soft power, reputation, and revenue [De Wit, Altbach, 2021]. Next, IHE grew into a means of enhancing ranking [De Wit, 2020], which became a permanent component of IHE [Marginson, 2017]. The ranking at national, regional, and global levels [De Wit, Altbach, 2021] shaped IHE tremendously and profoundly. Last but not the least, the IHE paradigm shifted from cooperation to competition [Van der Wende, 2001]. Therefore, the traditional target for understanding other languages and cultures through exchange and cooperation was overtaken by competition [De Wit, 2019]. Institutions and nations compete for students, scholars, talents, research funding, position in the global rankings, and high-impact publications [Ibid.].

Within each country, IHE policies and practices lacked coherence. They were fragmentary and marginal rather than systematic and strategic in institutional and national policies [De Wit, Altbach, 2021]. In addition, neither the concepts of the social role of higher education, nor teaching, nor research practices in different countries were aligned [Ibid.].

The trends towards commercialization and elitism [Ibid.] raised ethical concerns about IHE. Both tendencies were associated with competition derived from the economic and reputation purposes discussed above. The revenue generating intensified the competition in the IHE market. The stress on self-interest resulted in participants' losing sight of "learning from partners and diversity of policy and prac-

tice” [Jones, De Wit, 2014. P. 29]. Similarly, the obsession of educational institutions and national governments with ranking and reputation was at the cost of the development of a large majority of those institutions as well as their students and staff [De Wit, 2019]. Consequently, the traditional values of IHE, peace, mutual understanding, cooperation, and solidarity were sidelined [De Wit, 2020].

3.3. The strategy of IHE

The papers reviewed IHE strategies adopted at three levels: at the global level, or worldwide [OECD, 2004; 2006]; at the global-south level, i. e. in developing countries [De Wit et al., 2021]; at the national level, namely, in China [Gao, Liu, 2020; Wang, 2014; Wen, 2018; Wu, 2019; Yang, 2002; 2014].

From the global perspective, countries generally employed four types of strategies to promote cross-border education [OECD, 2004], which had different targets and approaches. The mutual understanding strategy promotes the international mobility of students and scholars, with political, cultural, academic, and development aid goals. The skilled migration strategy attracts international talents to study and work in the host country. The revenue-generating strategy seeks economic returns from recruiting international students. The capacity-building strategy draws on a foreign country's education when building the capacity of the home country. It is achieved through facilitating domestic students, teachers, and civil servants to study abroad and lifting barriers for foreign programs and providers in their cross-border education delivery. The latter strategy is importing-oriented, while the skilled migration and revenue-generating ones are exporting-oriented [OECD, 2006].

At the global south level, developing countries still mimic the high-income paradigm along with attempts to break it [De Wit et al., 2021]. Even though state governments played the leading role, their IHE options reflected the global trends in favoring mobility, longing for reputation and branding, and geographic focal points for developed countries [Ibid.].

From a national perspective, the “walking on two legs” strategy was the feature of China's internationalization with Chinese characteristics [Wang, 2014]. China attracted Chinese returnees from foreign countries to build international competitiveness through walking on the “bringing in” (BI) leg, and promoted the Chinese language and values worldwide to uphold China's influence and status through walking on the “going out” (GO) leg [Ibid.]. It was a two-way street approach as it involved both learning from the West and attracting the West to China [Constant et al., 2013]. It was a shift from one way of importing to a more balanced way of both importing and exporting [Yang, 2014], and also from an “inward-oriented” to an “outward-oriented” one [Wu, 2019].

Following the same strategy, the means and ends of China's IHE varied over time. With introducing the world to China as the primary motive in the 1980s [Wang, 2014], the country sponsored students and faculty members to study abroad from the late 1970s to the late 1980s [Gao, Liu, 2020]. In the 1990s, to catch up with developed countries, build world-class universities [Wang, 2014], and also connect its education with the global trends ("jiegui") [Yang, 2002], China began to promote transnational education in the 1990s [Gao, Liu, 2020]. Featuring the mobility of programs and providers [Knight, Mcnamara, 2017], China imported education resources to establish the Sino-foreign cooperative education⁸. There were two models: the international branch campus (IBC) recruited both international students and domestic students in China, while the Sino-foreign institute (SFI) enrolled domestic students only [Cai et al., 2024]. In the early 2000s, China entered into a new era, recruiting international students as priority [Gao, Liu, 2020], promoting the Chinese model [Wang, 2014], and exporting knowledge to the world [Yang, 2014].

China's means and ends in the IHE across time were summarized by Yang [2014]. With the imperative to realize the Four Modernizations through economic reform, China adopted three IHE approaches. The first one was the study abroad in two directions, with Chinese students and faculty going abroad and international students coming to China; the second means was integrating the international dimension into teaching and learning by using foreign textbooks, setting up English or bilingual programs; the third way was running transnational programs in China by collaborating with foreign institutions. To sum up, China's IHE strategy covers applying various approaches to meet diverse goals. Most of the literature discusses China's IHE strategies from a national perspective only. The exploration from the broader view of globalization and IHE global trends is limited, which is the gap this paper addresses.

4. Method

4.1. Data Collection

This qualitative study was based on two sets of data. The first set was the Annual Working Priority of the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China (Working Priority) from 2000 to 2023, with the omission of 2020. It was chosen because it is publicly accessible on the MOE official website and released annually and continuously, which made it possible to examine both details and general patterns over years. It is usually published at the beginning of each year to guide the annual work of MOE by listing the key tasks planned for that year.

⁸ State Council (2019) Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education: <https://www.crs.jsj.edu.cn/news/index/2> (accessed 28.11.2025).

The other set of data was eight official documents related to IHE (Table 1). To align with other government policies, the Working Priority normally cited the guiding principles and documents, which acted as the foundation and frame for the future plans. Seven documents were referred to by Working Priority as guiding policy documents, each of those discussing the IHE. The first Working Priority was issued in 2000, and the earliest document referenced was enacted in 1998. To consolidate background information before 2000, the Outline of China's Education Reform and Development enacted in 1993 was also included in the analysis.

Table 1. The Guiding Policy Documents Found in the Working Priority

No	Appear in WP	Guiding Policy Documents
1		Outline of China's Education Reform and Development (CPCCC & SC, 1993)
2	2000, 2001	Action Plan for Revitalizing Education in the 21st Century (MOE, 1998)
3	2000	Decision of CPC Central Committee and State Council on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promote Quality-Oriented Education (CPCCC & SC, 1999)
4	2002	Decision of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education (SC, 2001)
5	2003, 2004, 2005	Approval of Education Revitalization Action Plan 2003–2007 of Ministry of Education (SC, 2004)
6	2007, 2008	Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education (SC, 2007)
7	2010	Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) (MOE, 2010)
8	2019	China Education Modernization 2035 (CPCCC & SC, 2019)

Note: MOE stands for the Ministry of Education; CPCCC stands for the Communist Party of China Central Committee; SC stands for the State Council.

4.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis was in three steps. First, the prescribed code book was constructed (See the Appendix). A code for IHE approaches is created by integrating the direction with the respective focus of mobility. The direction was differentiated by the “bringing in” and “going out” aspects of China's IHE strategy discussed by Wang [2014]. “Bringing in” and “going out” pertain to inbound and outbound mobility, respectively. The focus was related to evolution of the cross-border education, including people (the first-generation), program and provider (the second generation), education hub (the third generation), as well as policy [Knight, 2011; 2012]. The code for IHE rationales followed the IHE rationales at the national level discussed by Knight [2004], including human resource, strategic alliance, commercial trade, nation-building, as well as social and cultural rationales.

Second, content analysis was performed on 22 Working Priority documents to sort out IHE approaches. Deductive coding was applied following the prescribed codebook. Any approach without involving mobility was coded inductively and themed into new categories. For each approach to be identified, the frequency of references to it in the Working Priority was counted on a yearly basis.

Third, based on the texts concerning internationalization in eight policy documents, discourse analysis was applied. It started by locating the approaches mentioned in the text, and tracked their matching purposes from multiple layers of titles, explanations, and consistent references in the text. The identified purposes were grouped as per rationales of human resource, strategic alliance, commercial trade, nation-building, and social and cultural rationales at the national level discussed by Knight [2004].

5. Results

Both in the Working Priority and the guiding policy documents, the term “internationalization” was not often used. Instead, the phrases “education reform and opening-up,” “foreign,” and “international cooperation and exchange” appeared more frequently. The content analysis of Working Priority found fifteen approaches in strategies of “bringing in”, “going out”, and “other”, with mobility as the dominant idea. The discourse analysis of Guiding Policy Documents identified five rationales matching with the approaches, with university and national branding in the nation-building rationale as highlights.

5.1. The approaches to promote IHE

China deployed fifteen approaches in its IHE, which mainly concerned mobility, along with IaH, cooperation, and engagement (Table 2). Both “bringing in” (BI) and “going out” (GO) strategies covered the mobility of people, programs, and providers. The mobility approach was extended to policy, as well as the massive education resources to build an educational hub, which combines BI and GO. In addition to mobility, on-campus research and postgraduate education, cooperation with different geographic focal points, and engagement on the international stage were mentioned.

Table 2. The IHE Approaches and Frequency in the WP

Strategy	Aspect	Approach	Freq.
Bringing in	People	International students	20
		Overseas returnees	13
		Foreign teachers	5
	Program & Provider	Sino-foreign cooperative education	18
Going out	People	Government-sponsored SA	16
		Self-funded SA	12

Strategy	Aspect	Approach	Freq.
	Program & Provider	Confucius Institute	20
		HE Running programs abroad	9
Bi-directional	Policy Mobility	Mutual recognition of qualifications	11
Others	Education Hub	Education experimental zone	5
	laH	Research & Postgraduate education	11
	Cooperation	Cooperation with HK, Macao, Taiwan	19
		Cooperation with international organizations	17
		Creating cooperative mechanism	18
Engagement	Hosting or participating in conferences, forums, and other events	11	

5.1.1. Approaches in the “bringing in” strategy

In the BI strategy, the government attracted international students, overseas returnees, foreign teachers, and foreign higher education institutions to China through the inbound mobility of people, programs, and providers.

The most cited approach in the BI strategy was recruiting international students. It has been listed as a priority each year since 2002. It emphasized expanding the international student scale in 2004 and 2005 and launching the “Study in China Plan” in 2010. This approach included diverse scholarship plans, e. g., Chinese Government Scholarships (CGS) mentioned in 2008 and 2009, further expanding CGS in 2011 to facilitate the “Study in China Plan” and the Silk Road Scholarship in 2017. Moreover, in 2018, the Silk Road Scholarship expanded the coverage from students to the teachers’ professional development and training talents with partnering countries collaboratively. With the rapid growth of international student education, the quality of education was another focal issue about this approach, which included improving the level of degrees offered in 2004, raising the quality of education in 2008 and 2009, and introducing the education quality standard in 2018.

Another two approaches concerning people in the BI strategy were attracting overseas returnees and managing foreign teachers. Attracting global talent had been mentioned for many years, while the specific focus was on overseas Chinese. It was mentioned that from 2000 to 2008, China encouraged them to come back to work in the country or contribute to China’s development in flexible ways. The global talents also included foreign teachers. Therein, the authorities focused on management rather than recruitment. The approach of program and institute mobility in the BI strategy materialized in the Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education project (SFCE). The purpose of importing high-quality education resources had been articulated for many years, and the focus of cooperation shifted with time. In 2002 and 2004, SFCE was supposed to run at higher education and vocational education le-

vels. In 2012 and 2013, cooperation with top universities was encouraged. In 2021, the high school was included in the existing market dominated by tertiary education. In 2022, cooperation with Hong Kong and Macau was emphasized. Additionally, education quality was emphasized in the SFCE approach in several ways. Monitoring and supervision were underscored in 2004, 2007–2009, and 2015; quality assurance was a priority in 2011 and 2012; quality evaluation and accreditation were highlighted in 2012; the balance of categories, disciplines, and regional layout was emphasized in 2014.

5.1.2. Approaches in the “going out” strategy

In the GO strategy, the government acknowledged and supported the outbound mobility of people, programs, and providers with opposite orientations and purposes. The two forms of outbound people mobility were inward-looking, aimed at learning from other countries, differing in funding sources. In contrast, the two modes of outbound program and provider mobility were outward-looking, meant for introducing China to the world, the focuses of introducing varying across programs.

The GO approach concerning people's mobility with funding referred to government-funded programs for Chinese people to study abroad. The government sponsorship targeted different populations. Sponsoring postgraduate students was first mentioned in 2003 and reemphasized from 2006 to 2009 to support the “top universities” project. What was more, the doctoral education, joint-degree, and partnership programs were stressed in 2008. The new target appeared in 2018, covering area study researchers and talents for working in international organizations. In the main theme of supporting high-profile talents and universities, the sponsorship was extended to some particular areas and populations as well. Special support for the ethnic minorities and less-developed regions in the Western part of China was planned in 2003, and study abroad support for university presidents was extended to principals and head teachers in primary and secondary schools in 2011. Along with sponsored people mobility, the evaluation of it was called for in 2010, 2011, and 2013.

The GO approach concerning people's mobility without sponsorship referred to encouraging self-funded students to study abroad. Government support was achieved by regulating study abroad agencies in the market starting in 2002, and shifted to provide more services to self-funded students in 2012. The intersection of government sponsorship and self-funded student approaches occurred in 2018. China planned to extend its sponsorship to self-funded students who enrolled in overseas universities and institutions.

The GO approach with program and provider mobility was realized by the Confucius Institute, focusing on the going out of the language and culture. It has been listed in the Working Priority every

year since 2002, and adopting the “going out” strategy was emphasized in 2013. In a way of benchmarking, the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) was launched in 2003 as a standard test for the Chinese language, which was followed by a branch of CHSK for commercial usage and HSK for children in 2006. To facilitate language learning and teaching, the Confucius Institute Scholarship was launched, and training local Chinese language teachers in the host country was highlighted in 2009.

The other GO approach with program and provider mobility was “going out” of Chinese higher education institutions. It was first planned in 2002 and 2003 and reemerged in 2013. “Going out” started with general higher education institutions in 2013 and moved to the top universities in 2014. The “going out” of vocational education was first mentioned in 2016. It was upgraded to the more specific Luban Workshop in 2019, which was connected with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2021. The “going out” of the International School for Overseas Chinese appeared in 2021 and 2022.

5.1.3. Approaches other than BI and GO strategies

As the BI and GO implied unidirectional mobility, the approaches with bidirectional mobility or without any could not fit into either strategy. They included policy mobility and education hub approaches involving mobility, also the IaH, cooperation, and engagement approaches without necessarily involving mobility.

Featuring bidirectional mobility, the policy mobility and education hub approaches involved both inward and outward education movement. The policy mobility approach refers to the mutual recognition of qualifications and degrees to facilitate IHE. The intended partnership started with foreign countries in general in 2002 and 2003, shifted to the Belt and Road countries from 2017 to 2019, and ASEAN countries in 2022. The education hub approach was initially planned in 2013, 2014, and 2015. It was not until 2021 that this approach was tied to particular locations, including the Hainan Free Trade Port, the Greater Bay Area, the Yangzi River Delta Region, and the Xiongan New Area. Specific directions were planned for two education hubs in 2022. The Greater Bay Area was expected to be the hub for top higher education institutions, and the Hainan Free Trade Port was anticipated to be the hub of tertiary education in the Science, Engineering, Agriculture, and Medical disciplines.

As another stream of IHE, IaH in China is mainly related to research and postgraduate education in higher education. Initially, research focused on the global trend of education development in 2004 and international standards in 2008. The turning points were the call for “Going Out of Humanity and Social Science (HSS)” in 2013 and 2014, which resulted in a plan to establish the Area Study Centers in 2014 and 2015, and the call for strengthening area studies in 2018 and 2019. Parallel with research, the IaH approach also considered postgraduate educa-

tion. It was mentioned in 2004 and 2006–2008, with the same intention but different partners. Stressing the collaborative feature of postgraduate education in the IaH approach, its intended partner in 2004 was institutions in developed countries, which was replaced by high-level institutions in foreign countries in 2006–2008.

The cooperation approach was applied in three aspects. First, China cooperated with Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. It was stressed every year from 2002 to 2018. In 2019, it was planned to provide more opportunities and facilitations for young people from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan to study, work, start businesses, and communicate with people in the mainland. Additionally, introducing the education of Hong Kong and Macau to the mainland and reversely introducing the basic education of the mainland to Hong Kong was planned in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Another partnership focus was international organizations, especially UNESCO, which was mentioned quite frequently starting from 2003. Cooperation with international organizations was pushed forward as involving global educational rule-setting in 2013 and 2019 and global educational governance in 2018 and 2022. Accordingly, cultivating talents for working and interning in an international organization has been emphasized since 2015. One more aspect of the cooperation approach was creating cooperative mechanisms, which has been mentioned since 2005. Starting from the call for bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation in 2002, the approach has stressed creating platforms and mechanisms since 2005. The cooperation focus was shifted from educational cooperation to people-to-people exchange in 2010. Within the calls for cooperation and mechanisms, the regional partnership was emphasized in 2006, 2008–2009, and 2011–2012, and the BRI starting from 2016.

The engagement approach is related to China's global presence through hosting or participating in diverse conferences, workshops, forums, and similar events. The focal areas mentioned include UNESCO (2004–2005, 2007, 2010–2021), OECD (2013), ASEAN (2010, 2017, and 2022), BRICS (2017, 2021–2022), G20 and APEC (2021), as well as One Belt and One Road since 2019.

5.2. The rationales to promote IHE

From the eight guiding policy papers, this study identified China's IHE purposes in five categories as per the rationales proposed by Knight [2004] (Table 3). Enhancing human resources and national building were the major rationales, and seeking economic returns was the least. The rationale of building strategic alliances and promoting cultural and social exchange have emerged in recent years. The approaches to achieving each purpose have changed over time (Table 4).

Table 3. The IHE Rationales

Doc. No	Human Resource	Strategic Alliance	Commercial Trade	National Building	Cultural & Social
1	√			√	
2	√			√	
3				√	
4	√				
5	√		√	√	
6	√	√	√	√	√
7	√	√		√	√
8		√		√	√

Table 4. The Approaches of Each IHE Rationale

Rationale	Aspect	Approach
Human Resource	HE development	Attracting overseas returnees
		Hiring foreign experts
		Funding university students and faculty to SA
National Building	Teacher development	Funding presidents, principals, and teachers to SA
		Education reform
National Building	National branding	Importing foreign programs and institutions
		Granting universities autonomy
		Building top universities
Commercial Trade	Education quality	Building top universities
	Exporting Chinese language education	Running Confucius Institute
Commercial Trade	Exporting higher education	Running HE programs abroad
	Strategic Alliance	Improving IHE level
Promoting mutual qualification recognition		
Cooperating with International organizations		
Engaging in global education development		
Promoting overall education development		
Strategic Alliance	Education aid	Providing professional training for developing countries
		Providing SA scholarships for developing countries
		Cultural & Social
Promoting international understanding		
Promoting people-to-people communication		

5.2.1. Human resource rationale

Building human resources was achieved in three ways. The first way was attracting overseas returnees, who were deemed as the state's "precious

treasures”⁹. Therefore, China “encouraged them to contribute to the socialist modernization¹⁰ and the quality of higher education and research”¹¹ by coming back to China or serving China in various ways”.

Another way was hiring foreign experts. China “invited globally well-known scholars, especially professors from top universities as guest professors to teach and research in our universities”¹².

The last direction was funding local talents to study abroad. China sent “deans in the university and heads of research institutions and laboratories¹³ and excellent university students¹⁴ to study abroad in top universities and research institutions”. They were expected to “consolidate research in higher education”¹⁵ and “contribute in the critical research and key discipline development”¹⁶. China also sent “presidents, principals, and head teachers in basic and higher education to study abroad”¹⁷ to “build capacity of teaching professionals”¹⁸.

5.2.2. National building rationale

Achieving the national building objective based on implementing education reforms, developing national branding and educational branding, and enhancing the quality of higher education.

First, China built its capacity through “education system reforms”¹⁹. It included “welcoming donations from Chinese in Hong Kong, Macao,

⁹ CPC Central Committee & State Council (1993) Outline for China's Education Reform and Development: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_177/tnull_2484.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

¹⁰ CPC Central Committee & State Council (1993) Outline for China's Education Reform and Development: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_177/tnull_2484.html (accessed 28.11.2025); State Council (2007) Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27737.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

¹¹ Ministry of Education (1998) Action plan for revitalizing education in the 21st century: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_177/tnull_2487.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020): http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A01/s7048/201007/t20100729_171904.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

¹⁵ Ministry of Education (1998) Action plan for revitalizing education in the 21st century: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_177/tnull_2487.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

¹⁶ State Council (2007) Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27737.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

¹⁷ Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020): http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A01/s7048/201007/t20100729_171904.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ CPC Central Committee & State Council (1993) Outline for China's Education Reform and Development: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_177/tnull_2484.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

and Taiwan and foreign countries, and friendly foreigners”, and “granting more autonomy to universities’ international cooperation and exchange”. It also covered “initiating Sino-foreign cooperative education as per China’s laws and regulations”²⁰, which was for “importing education resource”²¹.

Second, China enhanced its national and educational branding through “top universities” projects. It was declared that “building top universities is strategically important to build higher education strength and China’s global competitiveness”²². Therefore, China strived to make “top universities play a role in the global landscape through ‘211 Project’ and ‘985 Project’”²³ and “consolidate the global competitiveness of China’s higher education through building first-class universities”²⁴. Additionally, China encouraged “faculty to host or participate in the key research projects and conduct research collaboration to enhance the global influence and competitiveness in the academic field”²⁵.

Third, improving education quality was an essential component of nation-building. China expected to increase the quality of higher education through “implementing ‘211 Project’ and ‘985 Project’ and building world-class key laboratories and engineering technology centers”²⁶.

5.2.3. Commercial trade rationale

The revenue motive was mentioned only briefly, which was anticipated from exporting Chinese language education and higher education to the world. Both were designated to “explore the global education market”²⁷ and “participate in the global education service competition”²⁸. Marketing Chinese language education was expected from the “Confucius Institute”²⁹. As for exporting higher education, the go-

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ State Council (2004) Approval of Education Revitalization Action Plan 2003-2007 of Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27717.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020): http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A01/s7048/201007/t20100729_171904.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

²⁵ State Council (2007) Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27737.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ State Council (2004) Approval of Education Revitalization Action Plan 2003-2007 of Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27717.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

²⁸ State Council (2007) Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27737.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

²⁹ State Council (2004) Approval of Education Revitalization Action Plan 2003–2007 of Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27717.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

vernment “encouraged higher education institutions owning disciplines with Chinese characteristics and disciplines with competitive edge to go out”³⁰.

5.2.4. Strategic alliance rationale

The strategic alliance objective was achieved through efforts to enhance the level of international cooperation and exchange, to provide educational aid, and promote the overall education development of China as a whole.

First, upgrading the internationalization was based on “improving and creating bilateral and multi-lateral educational cooperation mechanisms and platforms”³¹ and “promoting mutual qualification recognition”³². It was also expected from “cooperating with international organizations, especially UNESCO”, and “engaging in bilateral, multi-lateral, regional and global education cooperation”³³.

Next, China provided educational aid to developing countries in two ways, namely, “providing scholarships to international students from developing countries” and “training professional talents for developing countries”³⁴.

Last but not least, to promote the overall education development of China as a whole, the government “strengthened the exchange and cooperation with Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan”³⁵.

5.2.5. Cultural and social rationale

The cultural and social objective was also based on efforts in three aspects to upgrade the internationalization level. It was addressed firstly by promoting the “Chinese language”³⁶. Then, China intended to

³⁰ State Council (2004) Approval of Education Revitalization Action Plan 2003–2007 of Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27717.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

³¹ State Council (2007) Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27737.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

³² State Council (2007) Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27737.html (accessed 28.11.2025); Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020): http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A01/s7048/201007/t20100729_171904.html (accessed 28.11.2025); CPC Central Committee & State Council (2019) China Education Modernization 2035: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-02/23/content_5367987.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

³³ Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020): http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A01/s7048/201007/t20100729_171904.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ State Council (2007) Approval of the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the Ministry of Education: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xgk/moe_1777/moe_1778/tnull_27737.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

“strengthen the international understanding education, promote intercultural communication, and improve students’ perception and understanding about different countries and cultures”³⁷. Lastly, the country aimed to “build mechanisms and expand the coverage of people-to-people communication to enhance people’s mutual understanding and mutual learning of different cultures”³⁸.

6. Discussion

Following the long-held strategy of “bringing in” and “going out”, China promoted IHE mainly through unidirectional mobility of people, programs, and providers, both inbound and outbound. It was supplemented by approaches involving bi-directional mobility (policy mobility and education hub) and those unrelated to mobility (IaH), as well as newly emerged cooperation and engagement approaches. When promoting IHE, China’s objectives were mainly human resource building and national building. It was accompanied by strategic alliance and cultural and social rationales, with economic return being the least essential motive.

6.1. The Government’s strategic plan

The IHE in China is the government’s intentional, systematic, and strategic plan in alignment with the state development agenda. China’s IHE policy is scattered across government policies instead of being based on stand-alone documents. It is often associated with “opening up” and general “internationalization” policies. As the “opening up” is an essential theme of China’s social and economic development, IHE has been referred to in all the Working Priority of Ministry of Education since 2000. It indicates that IHE is prominent in China’s national education agenda, and it is an “intentional” [De Wit et al., 2015] option of the government.

Being directed by the state [Wang, 2014] in the top-down model [Larbi et al., 2020], China’s IHE policies are closely aligned with the state development agenda. Consequently, IHE approaches evolved under a bigger umbrella strategy for state development. The “going out” of research through area study and setting up area study centers is consistent with funding area study researchers for them to gain knowledge abroad, which is the strategic and systematic response to China’s overall “Going out” strategy. Similarly, funding university presidents, principals, and head teachers from basic education to study abroad is the strategic response to the reform of promoting quality-oriented education in China.

³⁷ Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020): http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A01/s7048/201007/t20100729_171904.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

³⁸ CPC Central Committee & State Council (2019) China Education Modernization 2035: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-02/23/content_5367987.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

6.2. Multi-faceted approaches IHE in China is promoted by multi-faceted, innovative, and revolving approaches. The dominating one is the mobility approach, which supports the global trend [De Wit, Altbach, 2021] and global-south trend [De Wit et al., 2021]. The approaches covered all kinds of mobility [Knight, 2011; 2003] of cross-border education discussed by Knight (2011, 2013). The people, programs, and providers move across borders in two directions through “bringing in” and “going out” strategies. The policy and massive educational resources initiate the inbound and outbound movements simultaneously. As a typical item in the IaH, research is mobilized under the “going out” imperative.

New approaches emerged without dropping the traditional ones. As accepted streams of IHE [Knight, 2004], the mobility and IaH are the expected findings on IHE approaches. They are consistent with those of previous studies [Gao, Liu, 2020; Wang, 2014; Wu, 2019; Yang, 2014]. The new findings of this study are the cooperation and engagement approaches, which supplement but do not replace the traditional approaches.

The approaches have been continuously upgraded. Embarking on the education hub and setting up mutual recognition of educational qualification upgrades the level of cross-border education from unidirectional mobility to a bidirectional one. Confucius Institute and running education in foreign countries by Chinese higher education institutions are the outbound versions of the Sino-foreign Cooperative Education. “Going out” of Chinese higher education is a more advanced version than the “going out” of language and culture. Cultivating talents for working and internship in international organizations and funding students’ internships and employment there are deeper ways to interact with the international organizations. In the same cooperation approach, creating a cooperative mechanism is a deeper version of cooperation. Similarly, in the engagement approach, hosting conferences and events is a more engaging way than mere participation.

6.3. Shifting objectives IHE is developed with shifting objectives, national building being the dominant motive, especially enhancing national branding through building top universities. The national building objective is achieved through education reform and “top universities” projects. Receiving educational aid and granting universities autonomy were approaches utilized in the early 1990s. Running the Sino-foreign cooperative education considerably boosts the higher education supply in China. However, the IBC model recruits international students as well [Cai et al., 2024], which dilutes the education resources shared by domestic students in China. Thus, the “top universities” project is the critical means to enhance China’s educational branding and state branding. It started with the “211 Project” in 1995 and the “985 Project” in 1998 and was upgraded as the “Double First-Class Project” in 2015. It is ex-

pected to enhance the strength, global competitiveness, and global influence of China and its higher education.

The purposes of national building and human resource development are interwoven with “top universities” projects. The approaches of attracting overseas returnees and foreign experts and sponsoring students and faculty to study abroad build human resources for higher education to enhance their teaching quality and research.

The strategic alliance objectives are connected with geo-political factors rather than education relationship. Promoting mutual qualification recognition is the only approach for academic alliance. Creating educational cooperation mechanisms and platforms, cooperating with international organizations, and engaging in education cooperation are ways to enhance the state's presence and profile to promote IHE. The educational aid to developing countries and the change and cooperation with Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan reflect the focal points of China's international relations. The political orientation supports the point made by De Wit & Altbach [2021] on the global trend that political motives tend to overtake academic rationales.

The cultural and social objectives witness the re-emerging traditional value of IHE. The approach of promoting the Chinese language and culture is closely related to the national building rationale. On the other hand, international understanding education; intercultural communication; students' perception and understanding of different countries and cultures; people's mutual understanding and mutual learning of different cultures refer to the traditional value of IHE discussed by De Wit [2019; 2020]. Accordingly, the specific approach of promoting people-to-people communication is highlighted. The dominance of the national building motive and geopolitical orientation in the strategic alliance rationale is mitigated by cultural and social objectives. The “re-emerging nationalism” [Wen, 2018] is lighter with the re-emergence of traditional values.

The economic motive is weaker in China's IHE. Rather than generating revenue through attracting international students, it refers to the “going out” of both language and higher education, which are expected to perform well in the global education market and generate revenue. Nevertheless, the Confucius Institution serves as an instrument for enhancing the state's influence and status, building soft power [Wu, 2019]. Running education programs and institutions abroad by higher education institutions is perceived to be the instrument for enhancing international presence. The revenue generating capability of both motives seems doubtful.

6.4. Consistent strategy

IHE follows the same strategy with more outward orientation. China is still walking on “two legs” in its IHE. It is the long-held strategy based on the concept of China's internationalization with Chinese character-

ristics [Wang, 2014]. Standing on the “bringing in” leg, China brings in people, including attracting overseas returnees and hiring foreign experts for building the human resources of China, as well as recruiting international students with scholarships to develop strategic alliances with developing countries. In order to boost the supply of higher education, China brings in foreign programs and institutions to run the Sino-foreign cooperative education project. As for “going out”, China encourages people to study abroad by funding local talents in higher education and basic education to study abroad, as well as facilitating self-funded students to study abroad. The country encourages programs and providers to go out, including setting up Confucius Institutes to promote the Chinese language and culture and running education programs in foreign countries to promote China's higher education.

The “going out leg” is getting stronger and stronger. It supports the argument that China's IHE has shifted from “inward-oriented” to “outward-oriented” [Wu, 2019] and is more export-oriented [Yang, 2014]. Based on both inbound and outbound mobility of people, programs, and institutions, China initiates the going out of the IaH stream. It includes the going out of research through promoting area study, setting up area study centers, and funding area study researchers to gain knowledge abroad. This also involves extending government study abroad sponsorship to postgraduate students. Furthermore, China itself goes out to enhance the state's presence and profile on the global stage. It is reflected by the intention to “improve the level of IHE”. Using cooperation and engagement approaches, China takes opportunities to be involved in global education development and direct it. Connecting with international organizations, creating cooperative mechanisms and platforms, and participating and hosting international events are evidence of presence. Engagement in “bilateral, multilateral, regional and global”³⁹ education cooperation refers to the scale of the presence.

China is still learning from the world and also responding to its local needs. Echoing the same “walking on two legs” strategy, China learns from the world by sending local talents to study abroad in world-class universities and attracting the top universities to run Sino-foreign cooperative education. China also learns from IHE global trends by sticking to the traditional approaches of IA and IaH and building top universities for global ranking. In 2023, addressing the unbalanced development of Eastern and Western parts, China provided special support to the ethnic minority and less-developed regions in the Western part by introducing sponsorship for studying abroad. In addition, to boost the basic education, the sponsorship to university leaders was

³⁹ Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020): http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A01/s7048/201007/t20100729_171904.html (accessed 28.11.2025).

extended to principals and head teachers in primary and secondary school in 2011. Even though it is fragmentary and marginal compared to the systematic and strategic steps in promoting IHE, addressing the needs of local context connects the “local needs” with “global resources” through “internationalization practice”.

6.5. Challenges and concerns

IHE in China bears challenges and concerns. International student education is imperfect in terms of sustainability. Attracting and retaining international students is an approach for boosting skill migration or generating revenue [OECD, 2004], or building human capital [Knight, 2004] in countries popular with international students. However, it is not found in the economic motive. The human resource motive targets Chinese returnees and foreign experts rather than international students. As the most cited approach to promote IHE, it is related to the education aid for the strategic alliance rationale. China provides scholarships for students from developing countries to study in China, without generating revenue or building human capital for its development. The increasing scale of educating international students challenges the sustainability of IHE in China.

The “top universities” project tends to confuse the global ranking with the education quality. The finding of IHE rationales shows that building top universities is aimed at enhancing both the national branding and education quality. It suggests that the global ranking is an evidence of education quality. The approaches in human resource rationale show an intention to improve the quality of research and teaching through attracting global talent and building the capacity of local talent. However, the ranking is driven by quantitative indicators, such as the number of international students and faculty and co-authored international publications [De Wit, Altbach, 2021], and teaching draws less attention [Altbach, Hazelkorn, 2017]. The translation of global ranking into education quality is doubtful.

7. Conclusion

The IHE strategy of all states is shaped by globalization and the global trends emerged from this process. However, a national option can combine with the global trend without losing its own priorities, which generates open-ended and ever-changing outcomes. This paper explored China's IHE strategy in terms of its importance, focus and purpose, as well as the policy coherence and ethical concerns from the approaches to and rationales behind promoting IHE by China. It was found that China adopted the same “walking on two legs” strategy, with more outward and political orientation and awareness of local needs. Employing the IA and IaH approaches frequently contained in the global trend, China also developed innovative cooperation and engagement approaches. It was also found that IHE was not an end in

China, but an intentional, systematic, and strategic means for national building, which pose certain challenges.

The limitation of this study lies in the research method. The discourse analysis was a subjective process; the researcher's own perception of IHE practice might mislead the data analysis based on the literal meaning of policy texts. Nevertheless, this study enriches the literature on China's IHE strategy by bringing in the globalization perspective, identifying new approaches, and shifting rationales from the ever-changing IHE process.

This study found the dominant national building motive as well as the re-emergence of the traditional value of IHE to promote intercultural understanding and respect for diversity. It reminds us that IHE can contribute to the national self-interest as well as global peace. This study also found that local needs were addressed along with the country's engagement on the global stage. It reminds us that IHE can serve the national branding and also meeting local needs. As this study is based on policy review, what is identified is the approach, rationale, and strategy "on the paper". An empirical study of IHE practices will be our focus in the future.

**Appendix:
Prescribed Code
Book**

Code	Description
<i>Code for Approaches</i>	
Bringing In (people)	Inbound people mobility
BringingIn (program & provider)	Inbound program & provider mobility
Going Out (people)	Outbound people mobility
Going Out (program & provider)	Outbound program & provider mobility
Bi-directional (education hub)	Massive resource mobility in two ways
Bi-directional (policy)	Mutual qualification recognition
Other	Approaches without involving mobility
<i>Code for Rationales</i>	
Human Resource	Attracting foreign students IaH (research, education)
Strategic Alliance	Establishing geopolitical and economic relationships through mobility and collaborative research and education Obtaining a competitive edge from bilateral and regional cooperation
Commercial Trade	Seeking economic returns from education exporting
Nation-Building	Importing (programs & institutions) to boost education supply Receiving aid to fix education resource deficits
Social and Cultural	Promoting intercultural understanding and national cultural identity

Source: Created by author based on Wang [2014], Knight [2004; 2011; 2012].

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