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Rethinking Internationalization of Higher Education under Geopolitical Shifts: Policy Responses in China, Japan, Korea, Australia, and the United States

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1. Introduction

Since the 2010s, the global political and economic landscape has experienced profound shifts, marked by multipolarity, deglobalization, resurging nationalism, and intensifying geopolitical rivalries (Teo, 2024; Marginson, 2025a). The erosion of a unipolar liberal order and the emergence of competing power blocs have disrupted long-standing assumptions about international cooperation—including those underpinning global higher education. Once largely perceived as an apolitical, collaborative enterprise, the internationalization of higher education (IHE) is now deeply enmeshed in geopolitical calculations, affecting academic exchange, talent mobility, transnational education, and international research collaboration.

Traditionally, IHE has been understood as the integration of international, intercultural, or global dimensions into postsecondary education (Knight, 2004). This liberal internationalist framework emphasized mutual understanding, cross-border knowledge sharing, and global competence. It facilitated mass student and faculty mobility, collaborative research, and the establishment of branch campuses abroad. Universities pursued global visibility, and governments framed internationalization as a strategy for competitiveness and soft power.

However, geopolitical disruptions have reframed IHE as a contested and strategic policy field. It is now entangled with national security concerns, economic protectionism, and ideological tensions. Programs like the “China Initiative” (2018–2022) in the United States (U.S.) significantly chilled academic collaboration, particularly in science and technology (Chen, 2024), while many countries have begun scrutinizing international partnerships and foreign student admissions through the lens of strategic risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these trends. It halted international student flows, disrupted research collaboration, and exposed the vulnerabilities of tuition-dependent financial models. Australia’s reliance on Chinese students, for instance, drew criticism when diplomatic tensions intensified during the pandemic (Ramaswamy & Kumar, 2021). In response, governments recalibrated their internationalization strategies to align with national development priorities, security imperatives, and regional diplomacy (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2024).

This paper examines how five major higher education systems—China, the U.S., Australia, Japan, and South Korea—have adapted to these new geopolitical realities. Each country occupies a strategic position in the evolving global order and faces unique political, economic, and demographic pressures. China is pursuing a proactive, state-led approach aligned with initiatives like the Belt and Road and the Double First-Class Initiative. The U.S., while still a global academic powerhouse, is emphasizing risk sensitivity and technological sovereignty. Australia has shifted toward diversification and Indo-Pacific regionalism. Japan is refining a quality-oriented, risk-sensitive, and digitally enabled model, and South Korea is linking internationalization with demographic recovery and regional revitalization.

Drawing on policy documents, institutional strategies, and recent theoretical frameworks—including glonacal agency, responsible internationalization, and strategic regionalism—this paper adopts a comparative, multi-scalar lens to analyze the changing logic of international engagement in higher education. It argues that internationalization is no longer a linear or inherently liberal process but a highly differentiated, contested, and politically contingent field of policymaking.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foundations and Conceptual Evolution of Internationalization

The concept of IHE has undergone substantial theoretical development over the past three decades. Knight (2004, p. 11) defined it as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education.” Knight’s framework emphasized the institution’s role in embedding global perspectives into teaching, research, and service. De Wit (2019) later expanded this to include both the systemic purposes (competitiveness, quality enhancement) and societal roles (global citizenship, cooperation).

Despite these functionalist approaches, several scholars have critiqued the Western-centric assumptions underlying dominant definitions. Marginson (2023) challenged the notion that internationalization is inherently progressive, arguing that it often reinforces global inequities, privileges Anglophone paradigms, and

neglects local epistemologies. These critiques have inspired new models such as “responsible internationalization” (Jones et al., 2021), which advocate for more ethical and inclusive forms of global academic collaboration, particularly with regard to marginalized regions and student populations.

2.2 Geopolitics and the Strategic Reframing of IHE

While early conceptualizations treated internationalization as a political or market-driven, recent scholarship recognizes that it is deeply embedded in geopolitics. Some researchers (Shih, 2024; Dar & Javid, 2025; Marginson, 2025b) argue that global shifts—multipolarity, the U.S.-China rivalry, and national security policies—have transformed higher education into a site of strategic competition. The China Initiative in the U.S., scrutiny of Confucius Institutes, and Japan’s tightening of joint research protocols exemplify how international collaboration is increasingly framed through security logics (Douglass, 2021). Against this backdrop, Lee (2021) contends that internationalization should be reconceptualized fundamentally as a matter of power, rather than a neutral or purely cooperative endeavor.

Moscovitz and Sabzalieva (2023) proposed the SAIOS framework—analyzing Scale, Agency, Interests, Opportunity Structures, and Strategy—as a tool to capture how governments align higher education policy with shifting geopolitical priorities. Similarly, Marginson’s (2022) revisitation of the glonacal agency heuristic (originally developed with Rhoades in 2002) underscores how universities now operate within nested power structures shaped simultaneously by global trends, national strategies, and institutional positioning.

2.3. Strategic Regionalism and Regionalization of Academic Partnerships

An increasingly important theme in contemporary IHE research is strategic regionalism. Robertson et al. (2016) define this as the deliberate construction of regional educational spaces that reflect shared political, cultural, and economic interests—distinct from universalist or globalist models. In Asia, this is exemplified by initiatives such as China’s Belt and Road Education Strategy, Japan’s Campus Asia, and ASEAN+3 frameworks, which aim to build regionally embedded forms of mobility, knowledge production, and governance.

In Australia, the post-pandemic Indo-Pacific pivot shows how geopolitical realignment is reshaping academic strategies. Likewise, South Korea's New Southern Policy and the Study Korea 300K Project highlight how regionalism is being used to solve domestic challenges like demographic decline and labor shortages, while simultaneously reducing reliance on volatile geopolitical partners.

These findings align with De Wit and Altbach's (2021) argument that internationalization is no longer primarily global, but increasingly "regional by necessity" due to fractured global cooperation and rising national protectionism. Marginson (2025) notes that these developments are not merely defensive but often proactive strategies for states and institutions to exercise agency, foster resilience, and address both domestic and cross-border challenges.

2.4. COVID-19 and Digital Internationalization

The COVID-19 pandemic served as an accelerant, exposing vulnerabilities in hyper-mobile models of IHE and forcing institutions to rapidly adopt digital internationalization. Scholars such as Tran et al. (2023) observe that virtual mobility, hybrid exchange models, and digital research collaborations have become strategic complements to physical exchange. At the same time, Hari et al. (2023) warn that digital formats cannot fully replicate the intercultural learning experience, and they often exacerbate inequalities in technological access, language proficiency, and academic recognition—especially for institutions and students in the Global South.

Nevertheless, digital engagement is now recognized as a core dimension of resilient internationalization, particularly in countries like Japan and China that are leveraging online platforms to maintain global visibility while reducing exposure to security and public health risks.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

Despite the richness of scholarship on internationalization, three key gaps justify the need for this study:

First, while many studies focus on single-country cases (e.g., China's Double First-Class, Australia's diversification, or U.S. visa policies), few systematically

compare how internationalization strategies vary across distinct political systems in the context of shared global pressures. Second, most literature either addresses pre-pandemic global trends or post-pandemic institutional responses, but rarely connects these trajectories in a comprehensive longitudinal and geopolitical frame. Third, there is limited integration of geopolitical theory (e.g., spatial power, nationalism, deglobalization) into mainstream IHE literature. This paper draws on recent theoretical advancements (e.g., Marginson, 2022, 2025; Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023) to better situate internationalization within broader global transformations.

Thus, this paper contributes by offering a comparative, multi-scalar, and policy-focused analysis of five key higher education systems (China, the U.S., Australia, South Korea, and Japan), using a consistent analytical lens to reveal both divergences and convergences. It also proposes new frameworks—such as “glocalized internationalization” and “risk-sensitive engagement”—to interpret current transitions in international higher education.

3. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical foundation

This study adopts a multi-theoretical approach to understand how geopolitical transformations are reshaping IHE. Central to this analysis is the Glonacal Agency Heuristic (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), which conceptualizes higher education as influenced by the dynamic interactions of global, national, and local forces. This framework is particularly useful in assessing how national policy shifts are mediated by institutional agency and transnational academic norms, offering a nuanced understanding of how internationalization strategies differ across geopolitical contexts.

The study also draws on the principle of responsible internationalization (Jones et al., 2021), which calls for a more ethical, equitable, and sustainable approach to cross-border education. In an era marked by securitization, academic decoupling, and rising nationalism, responsible internationalization emphasizes balancing openness with ethical obligations—particularly regarding academic freedom, knowledge reciprocity, and inclusive access.

Additionally, the concept of strategic regionalism is employed to capture how states and institutions increasingly turn toward regional partnerships as a risk-mitigation strategy amid global instability. Regionalism offers a pragmatic approach to international engagement that balances national interests with transnational cooperation, especially when global frameworks become politically or economically volatile. This approach is particularly salient in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, where multilateral initiatives such as the ASEAN Higher Education Area, the CAMPUS Asia program, and China's Belt and Road education diplomacy aim to enhance academic connectivity and knowledge exchange within a defined geopolitical space (Mok & Hawkins, 2010; Robertson et al., 2016).

Lastly, the "Strategic Approaches to the Internationalization of Higher Education for Societal Impact" (SAIOS) framework (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023) is used to interpret internationalization as a policy field structured by scale, agency, interests, opportunity structures, and strategic orientation. Together, these frameworks support the paper's core argument: internationalization has shifted from an open-ended global project to a managed, selective, and context-specific process shaped by geopolitical logics and national imperatives.

3.2. Research methods

This paper employs a qualitative comparative case analysis to examine how national and institutional strategies of IHE have evolved in response to shifting geopolitical conditions. The analysis draws upon multiple data sources, including central government policy documents (2010–2025), institutional internationalization strategies, statistical datasets on student mobility, expert presentations, and peer-reviewed literature. Methods include document analysis, content analysis of policy rhetoric, and synthesis of secondary sources to identify cross-country patterns and divergences.

The five countries selected—China, the U.S., Australia, Japan, and South Korea—represent major regional and global higher education systems that have experienced significant geopolitical exposure. China and the U.S. are the two largest scientific powers and key actors in global academic tensions. Australia, highly dependent on international education, has faced dramatic realignments in its internationalization strategies. Japan and South Korea, while regionally influential, are also navigating demographic shifts and balancing global

integration with domestic priorities. Together, these cases offer a diverse yet comparable lens to assess internationalization in a geopolitically reconfigured world.

4. Analysis of Policy Changes in the Case Countries

4.1 China: Strategic Space-Making and Security Logic

Over the past decade, China's IHE has undergone a fundamental transformation, shaped by evolving geopolitical aspirations, intensified global uncertainties, multipolarization, the rise of anti-globalization and nationalism, and rapid advances in digital technology (Huang, 2025a). While earlier strategies were characterized by a relatively open and integrative approach, recent policy directions reflect a decisive shift toward what can be described as strategic space-making—a proactive effort to shape, secure, and assert China's presence in global higher education through state-centered, security-informed, and regionally focused initiatives.

From Passive Global Integration to Proactive Global Order-Making

Historically, China's engagement with IHE was marked by its desire to integrate into the global knowledge economy. The establishment of joint programs, Confucius Institutes, and the attraction of international students were key elements in building soft power and educational visibility (Yang, 2007). However, this era of openness has gradually given way to an assertive posture where internationalization is seen not only as a developmental tool but also as a strategic resource tied to national security, technological sovereignty, and ideological influence (X. Li, 2021).

Central to this strategic turn is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in education, which promotes regional academic networks through cooperation agreements, scholarships, Confucius Institutes, and capacity-building platforms with partner countries, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe (Huang, 2020). The Ministry of Education's 2016 "Action Plan for Promoting Educational Cooperation in the BRI" laid the foundation for a China-led educational order in the Global South. This initiative has expanded significantly through regional alliances and

bilateral MOUs with ASEAN, African Union member states, and other emerging economies (Liu et al., 2025).

Another hallmark is the Double First-Class Initiative, launched in 2015 and institutionalized through subsequent policy updates (2017, 2018, 2022). Unlike earlier projects such as Project 211 or 985, Double First-Class emphasizes world-class universities and disciplines as strategic platforms to project global influence. These institutions are expected not only to lead in research excellence but also to contribute to China's international agenda by fostering "international discourse power" and resisting perceived "Western academic hegemony" (Huang, 2021; M. Li, 2021).

Shifting from Openness to Sovereignty and Security

The shift from a narrative of openness to one centered on sovereignty and security is grounded in a broader redefinition of internationalization's role within China's domestic political and ideological architecture. The 2020 policy document *Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening-Up of Education in the New Era* retains the rhetoric of openness but also includes strong provisions for "risk assessment mechanisms" in joint programs and foreign academic partnerships. By 2022, additional measures had been enacted to strengthen party leadership within Sino-foreign cooperative institutions and regulate the use of foreign textbooks and curricula.

Recent developments such as the China–US "tech decoupling" have further reinforced this logic. The *Outline of the Plan for Building a Leading Country in Education (2024–2035)* states that internationalization must "serve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and "safeguard the ideological and political integrity of education" (MOE, 2025). Shan (2024) demonstrates that Chinese universities increasingly implementing 'cultural security risk assessment' frameworks to manage ideological risks in international academic exchange. Consequently, internationalization is increasingly governed by strategic selectivity, with a growing focus on South-South cooperation, knowledge sovereignty, and "safe" international research platforms.

The Role of Central Government as a Strategic Actor

The Ministry of Education, the State Council, and related agencies have evolved from being policy designers to becoming strategic space-makers. They do not merely respond to international developments but actively shape the international architecture of academic collaboration through regulations, funding, and institutional restructuring. As Huang (2025a) notes, the central government has positioned universities as agents of “academic diplomacy,” especially within initiatives like the BRI and the establishment of Confucius Institutes, which promote Chinese language, history, and values abroad.

This centralization of internationalization policy is evident in new administrative layers, such as the Bureau of International Cooperation and Exchanges under the MOE, tasked with overseeing compliance, political alignment, and bilateral educational diplomacy. These structures coordinate across ministries (e.g., foreign affairs, finance, national development) to align education with broader statecraft.

Digital Internationalization and Risk-Averse Collaboration

China’s response to geopolitical pressures has also manifested in a pivot to digital internationalization. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and technological innovation, China has promoted virtual academic exchanges, digital joint courses, and online collaborative research platforms (Huang, 2025a). Virtual initiatives are seen as tools to maintain international reach while mitigating cross-border risks. As a result, China is rapidly becoming a leader in virtual exchange platforms within the Global South, supported by universities such as Tsinghua, Fudan, and Zhejiang (Song & Li, 2020).

Digital strategies also intersect with risk-averse international collaboration models. Sensitive areas such as AI, biotechnology, and strategic engineering are increasingly pursued through domestic collaborations or regionally trusted alliances rather than globalized networks. This logic aligns with broader policies such as the *National Medium- and Long-Term Talent Development Plan*, which prioritizes self-reliance in critical research domains.

South-South Cooperation and Strategic Opportunity Structures

In redefining the geography of internationalization, China has invested in South-South cooperation as a long-term pillar of its global education strategy. Educational partnerships with countries in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia have been formalized through scholarships, Confucius Institutes, capacity-building programs, and multilateral platforms (e.g., the China–Africa Education Cooperation Forum). These engagements offer mutual recognition of degrees, student and faculty mobility, and curriculum co-development, reinforcing China’s vision of a multipolar educational order.

The logic here is twofold: to circumvent Western dependency and to construct alternative epistemic communities anchored in shared developmental and political goals. This is not merely a diversification strategy but a normative attempt to offer a model of internationalization rooted in ‘cooperation, non-interference, and mutual respect’—an explicit contrast to Western-centric models (M. Li, 2021; Robertson et al., 2016, pp. 104).

These evolving policy priorities are also reflected in a series of national-level documents that chart the institutional trajectory of China’s internationalization strategy over the past 15 years (see Table 1).

Table 1: Timeline of Major National Policies for Internationalization in China (2010–2025)

Year	Policy Title	Issuing Body
2010	National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)	State Council
2016	Action Plan for Promoting Educational Cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative	Ministry of Education
2018	Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of ‘Double First-Class’ Universities	MOE, MOF, NDRC

2019	China Education Modernization 2035	Central Committee, State Council
2020	Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening-Up of Education in the New Era	Ministry of Education
2022	Opinions on Deepening the Advancement of World-Class Universities and Disciplines Construction	MOE, MOF, NDRC
2025	Outline of the Plan for Building a Leading Country in Education (2024–2035)	Central Committee, State Council

Source: Created by authors (2025) based on publicly available online information.

Apparently, China’s internationalization strategy has transitioned from passive participation in a Western-led global education system to proactive leadership in a multipolar, politically fragmented, and increasingly securitized global order (Huang, 2025a, 2025b; Wen et al., 2023). Through initiatives like BRI, the Double First-Class Initiative, and digital internationalization, China is creating new “opportunity structures” to advance its national interests while navigating external constraints. This model of state-centered, regionally embedded, and risk-calibrated internationalization not only redefines China’s global academic role but also signals a broader transformation in how IHE is conceptualized and practiced in the 21st century.

4.2. The United States: From Leadership to Securitization

The U.S. has long served as a global hub for IHE, characterized by its dominant position in international student enrollment, global research collaboration, and institutional mobility networks. However, since the mid-2010s—and particularly during the Trump administration (2017–2021)—the country has increasingly adopted a securitized approach to international engagement in higher education. A combination of national security concerns, ideological tensions, and anti-immigration rhetoric has shifted U.S. policy away from liberal internationalism toward a framework that prioritizes technological sovereignty, visa restrictions, and risk aversion in foreign academic partnerships.

The China Initiative and the Rise of National Security Concerns

The most prominent symbol of the U.S.'s turn to securitization in higher education was the China Initiative (APA Justice, 2022), launched by the Department of Justice in 2018. This program aimed to combat espionage and intellectual property theft allegedly conducted by Chinese nationals in U.S. research institutions. While ostensibly designed to protect U.S. scientific leadership, the initiative resulted in widespread racial profiling and academic surveillance, particularly targeting Chinese and Chinese American researchers. Over 250 academics were investigated, many lost their jobs or faced reputational damage, and at least one suicide was attributed to the prosecutions.

The initiative triggered a chilling effect on Sino-U.S. academic exchange and significantly contributed to a broader climate of mistrust. Scientific collaboration and co-authored publications between Chinese and American scholars declined sharply between 2018 and 2022, and leading Chinese institutions were banned from collaborative projects or student exchanges involving U.S. federal research funding.

Travel Bans and the Politicization of Immigration

Under the Trump administration, a series of travel bans and visa policy changes further constrained international student flows. Executive Order 13769, known as the Muslim Travel Ban, restricted entry from seven Muslim-majority countries and had a chilling effect on academic mobility from the Middle East, South Asia, and parts of Africa (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). Additionally, visa revocation proposals, such as the Duration of Status Rule—which sought to limit student visa duration to four years—generated considerable uncertainty among international students and institutions.

The pandemic further exacerbated these tensions, with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) briefly proposing a policy in July 2020 to deport international students if their institutions moved to online instruction due to COVID-19 (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2020). This move was met with lawsuits from major universities and swift backlash from the global academic community, eventually forcing the administration to reverse the decision.

Strategic STEM Prioritization and Talent Retention Policies

Despite the securitization trend, the U.S. has also maintained a contradictory emphasis on retaining global STEM talent. Programs such as the STEM Optional Practical Training (OPT) extension allow international graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics to stay in the U.S. for up to 24 months post-graduation to gain work experience (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021). This policy reflects the nation's desire to remain competitive in innovation while selectively engaging with global talent pipelines.

The 2017 National Security Strategy under the Trump administration acknowledged this duality, highlighting the importance of attracting international STEM talent as vital for maintaining U.S. leadership in technological innovation (White House, 2017). However, this strategy also called for greater scrutiny of foreign students, especially those from China, Russia, and Iran, reflecting the underlying tension between openness and control.

The Closure of Confucius Institutes and Receding Soft Power

As geopolitical tensions intensified, the U.S. government and Congress targeted Confucius Institutes (CIs)—Chinese government-sponsored language and culture centers operating in American universities. These institutes were accused of promoting Chinese propaganda, restricting academic freedom, and serving as instruments of political influence. By 2024, over 100 Confucius Institutes had been closed across the U.S. due to federal pressure and legislative restrictions (Gil, 2024).

While the closures were framed as safeguarding institutional autonomy, critics argued that the U.S. response was symptomatic of broader anxieties about China's global influence. The removal of CIs diminished U.S. universities' ability to provide Chinese language education and weakened soft power mechanisms aimed at fostering cross-cultural understanding.

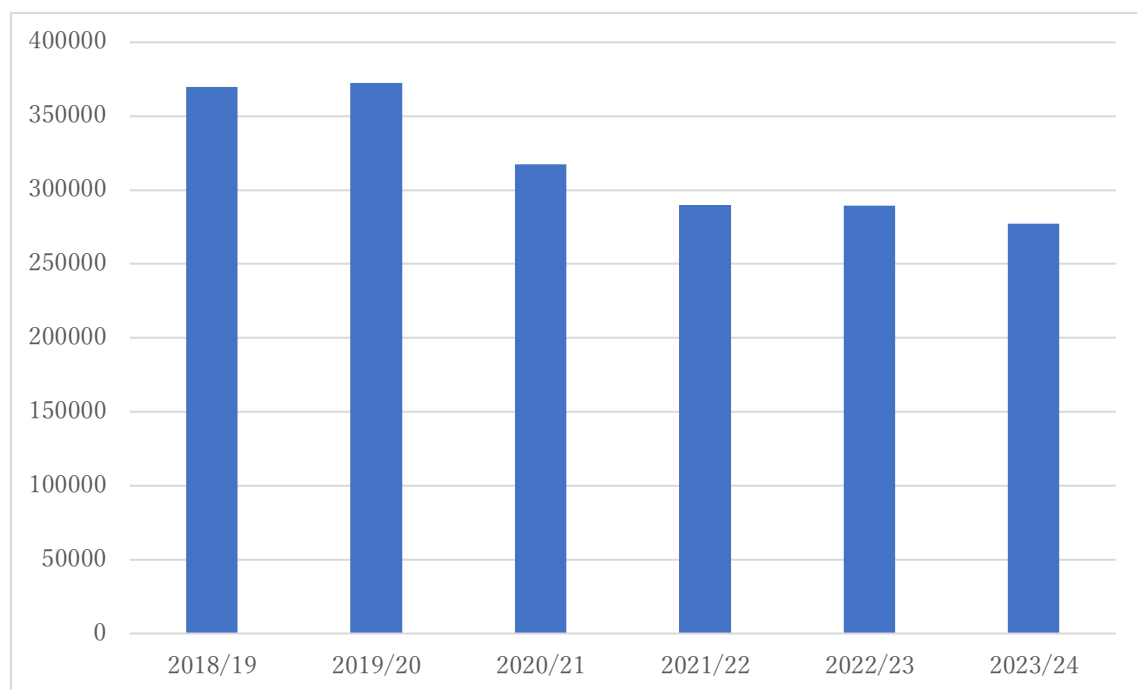
The Decline in Chinese Student Enrollment (2018–2023)

Chinese students have traditionally formed the largest international student group in the U.S., contributing substantially to university finances and campus diversity. However, since 2018, Chinese student enrollment has declined sharply,

driven by a combination of visa delays, increased scrutiny, anti-Asian sentiment, and deteriorating U.S.–China relations (Mok et al., 2024; Chen, 2024). From a high of approximately 370,000 students in 2018, Chinese enrollments dropped by over 20% by 2023 (see Figure 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these trends. Not only were physical mobility and visa processing disrupted, but Asian students reported heightened experiences of racism and discrimination on campus. Several incidents—such as racist posters at dorms and public harassment—drew national attention (Juan, 2020). Surveys and interviews have documented international students’ declining sense of safety and belonging, further discouraging prospective applicants from China and elsewhere (Hari et al., 2023).

Figure 1. Decline in Chinese Student Enrollment in the U.S. (2018–2023)



Source: Number of college and university students from China in the United States from academic year 2013/14 to 2023/24. *Statista*. Retrieved on 26th June from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/372900/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-in-the-us/>

Institutional Responses: Between Globalism and Federal Constraints

Despite restrictive federal policies, many U.S. universities have continued to advocate for inclusive and globally engaged campuses. Prestigious institutions such as the University of Michigan, Stanford, and the University of California system have openly expressed support for international students and defended their commitment to global academic partnerships—even with Chinese institutions like Shanghai Jiao Tong and Wuhan University (e.g., Tang, 2025).

However, the divergence between institutional and federal positions has led to policy fragmentation. While universities promote diversity, internationalization, and cross-border collaboration, they remain constrained by visa policies, federal funding restrictions, and political scrutiny. This institutional–federal tension defines the current U.S. internationalization landscape. Table 2 summarizes key federal and institutional policies from 2017 to 2023 that have collectively shaped the shifting landscape of U.S. higher education internationalization.

Table 2. U.S. Federal and Institutional Policies Affecting Internationalization (2017–2023)

Policy/Initiative	Description and Impact
China Initiative (2018–2022)	DOJ-led campaign targeting Chinese researchers; chilled academic ties
Travel Ban (2017)	Limited student mobility from Muslim-majority countries
STEM OPT Extension (2008/2016)	Retains STEM graduates for U.S. workforce competitiveness
National Security Strategy (2017)	Balances talent attraction with national security
Confucius Institute Closures (2018–2024)	Most U.S.-based CIs closed amid concerns of foreign influence

Duration of Status Rule (2020, revoked)	Would have imposed strict visa timeframes
Institutional advocacy (ongoing)	University-led efforts to preserve inclusive internationalization

Sources: Created by authors (2025) based on publicly available online information.

Seemingly, the U.S.' internationalization strategy is increasingly marked by contradictions. On one hand, the country seeks to maintain its leadership in global science and innovation by attracting top international talent—especially in STEM. On the other, federal policies driven by national security concerns have curtailed cross-border mobility, closed cultural programs, and strained relationships with critical academic partners such as China. The securitization of higher education has not only affected institutional autonomy but also altered the global perception of U.S. universities as open, liberal spaces of learning.

Moving forward, U.S. higher education must navigate this paradox of openness and protectionism, balancing national interests with academic values. Restoring credibility in international education will require reimagining global engagement not merely as an economic or competitive asset, but as a vehicle for mutual understanding, ethical responsibility, and transnational collaboration.

4.3 Australia: Diversification Amid Risk

Australia has historically been one of the most globally open and market-driven higher education systems in the world. International education has become deeply embedded in its national economic model, contributing AUD 40.4 billion annually before the COVID-19 pandemic and making international education Australia's largest services export and fourth-largest export sector overall (Australian Government, 2021b). However, this success has also bred systemic risk, particularly due to Australia's overreliance on Chinese international students. The convergence of geopolitical tensions with China and the pandemic-induced disruption catalyzed a major policy reorientation: a strategic diversification agenda that aims to realign international education with principles of resilience, regional engagement, and risk management.

Structural Dependence and its Risks

Australia's higher education system has long operated on a commercial model of internationalization. For example, across the Group of Eight (Go8) universities (all large research-intensive universities), international student fee revenue accounts for more than 20% of total annual operating revenue (Croucher et al., 2019), with some accounting for nearly 30% (Birrell & Betts, 2018). Furthermore, approximately half of the international student fee revenue comes from Chinese students (Croucher et al., 2019). While this model supported high-quality research and infrastructure, it also created structural vulnerabilities (Marginson, 2011). Analysts have warned of this overdependence for years, noting that a collapse in Chinese enrollment could have a cascading effect on institutional solvency and academic staffing (e.g., Altbach & Welch, 2010; Babones, 2019; Calderon, 2020).

This concentration of source countries was not merely a function of market forces, but the result of an ecosystem of policies—student visa pathways, post-study work rights, and marketing strategies—that encouraged bulk recruitment from Asia, particularly China and India. However, the limited diversification of source countries left the sector exposed to sudden geopolitical and economic shocks, and this weakness became acute by 2020.

COVID-19 and the Collapse of Mobility

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically shocked Australia's international education sector, exposing its structural vulnerabilities. Between 2020 and 2021, border closures halted new enrollments and stranded tens of thousands of international students offshore. The Australian government's initial response—urging international students to “go home” rather than providing support—was widely criticized as a betrayal of students and an indicator of the sector's instrumentalized logic (Ramaswamy & Kumar, 2022).

Tensions between Canberra and Beijing further aggravated the situation. Diplomatic disputes over Australia's call for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, combined with prior frictions over issues related to Huawei and Hong Kong, Taiwan's independence, and China's escalation in the South China Sea, triggered a severe deterioration in bilateral relations (Welch, 2022; Tran et

al., 2023). Anti-Chinese sentiment in public discourse, coupled with university closures of Confucius Institutes (Visentin, 2021) and media narratives portraying students as economic instruments or security risks, alienated prospective Chinese applicants (Welch, 2022).

From a policy perspective, these developments exposed the fragility of Australia's internationalization model. The combination of an over-concentration of Chinese students, minimal domestic financial buffers, and the absence of cohesive federal leadership triggered what many viewed as a crisis of confidence in international education governance (Tran et al., 2023).

The Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030

In response to vulnerabilities mentioned above, the government launched the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030, a landmark document that redefines the national vision for internationalization. The strategy moves away from volume-driven recruitment and toward a more balanced approach focused on long-term partnerships, student well-being, digital innovation, and regional diversification.

One of the central pillars of the strategy is diversification—both in terms of source countries and delivery modes. Institutions are encouraged to improve the current situation where international students are heavily concentrated in a few countries of origin and achieve an optimal mix of student cohorts, which can foster greater cultural awareness and enable long-term global partnerships. The plan also promotes greater onshore-offshore integration, emphasizing transnational education (TNE), online education onshore and offshore, and hybrid delivery models that minimize mobility-related risk while maintaining academic links.

The strategy also embeds risk management frameworks, with increased scrutiny of international partnerships that may involve foreign interference or cybersecurity threats. To expand risk awareness among university senior management and academics and legitimize a more circumscribed set of international collaborations, the Guidelines to Counter Foreign Interference in the Australian University Sector were produced in 2019 and updated in 2021. In 2020, the passage of the Foreign Relations Act empowered the Foreign Minister to

cancel partnerships between Australian and international universities if they pose a perceived national security risk (Shih et al., 2024, 2025).

From China to the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Regionalization

The Indo-Pacific focus is not new in Australia’s foreign policy but has become more prominent in international education after 2020. Through capitalizing on the potential of Australia’s alumni networks in the region, the Australian Government aims to deepen ties with the Indo-Pacific region (Australian Government, 2021b). In line with this, the Government promotes student mobility programs such as the New Colombo Plan and scholarships targeted to the region as instruments for soft power diplomacy, with students, both inbound and outbound, being actors or potential actors in diplomacy with the region (Tran & Vu, 2018; Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2024). The Government’s efforts at this regionalization align with geopolitical objectives of countering Chinese influence, building reciprocal educational ecosystems, and promoting Australia as a hub of democratic knowledge exchange in the region (Fenton-Smith & Gurney, 2024).

Table 3 outlines the major national policies and events that have shaped Australia’s international education agenda over the past two decades, reflecting the sector’s evolving priorities and vulnerabilities.

Table 3. Timeline of Australia’s International Education Policies (2000–2024)

Year	Policy Document or Event	Key Features
2009	International Students Strategy for Australia 2010-2014 (Council of Australian Governments, 2009)	Support services, visa policies, consumer protection
2016	National Strategy for International Education 2025 (Australian Government, 2016)	Global competitiveness, branding, partnerships

2018	Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (Australian Government, 2018)	Disclosures for foreign-funded research, Confucius Institutes targeted
2019	Guidelines to Counter Foreign Interference in the Australian University Sector (Modified in November 2021) (Australian Government, 2021a)	Security screening of partnerships, data protection mandates
2020	COVID-19 Travel Bans and Border Closures	Halted physical mobility, stranded offshore students
2021	Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030 (Australian Government, 2021b)	Diversification, student well-being, regional focus
2023	Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040 (Chapter 7: Education and skills) (Australian Government, 2023)	Capacity-building, economic and people-to-people links with Southeast Asia

Sources: Created by authors (2025) based on publicly available online information.

Structural Critiques and Future Directions

Despite policy reform, critiques about structural issues persist. Scholars such as Marginson (2011), Chatterjee & Barber (2021), and Healey (2023) argue that Australia's model remains fundamentally commercialist, with insufficient consideration of equity, ethics, or reciprocity. Asia is often viewed as a source of fee-paying students rather than as a region for collaborative research or mutual innovation (Marginson, 2011). Others highlight that while policy discourse emphasizes diversity, institutional recruitment patterns continue to favor the most lucrative markets (e.g., Babones, 2019; Ramaswamy & Kumar, 2022).

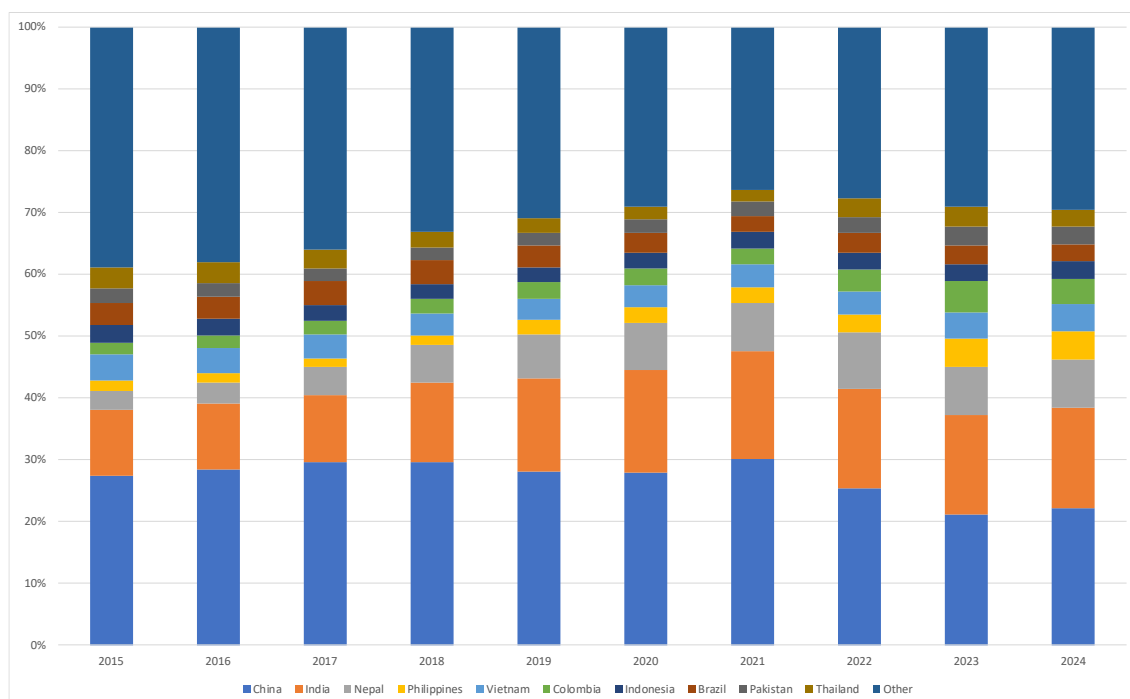
Another criticism is that governance in the international education sector is fragmented and lacks coordination. While the federal government holds the visa levers, state and university actors implement their strategies with little

coordination with each other. During COVID-19, mismatched messages from governments and universities undermined credibility and trust, especially in international markets such as China and India (Tran et al., 2023).

Looking ahead, Australia faces a dual imperative: to rebuild its international education sector in a way that is economically resilient, geopolitically aligned, and ethically grounded. Whether this rebalancing succeeds will depend on the depth of institutional reform, the coherence of government policy, and the authenticity of engagement with emerging partners.

Despite diversification rhetoric, recent enrollment data show continued reliance on a narrow set of countries, as illustrated in Figure 2, that the composition of Australia's international student cohort from 2015 to 2024, highlighting the dominance of students from a small number of source countries—particularly China and India. While there are modest increases in enrollments from Southeast Asia and Latin America in recent years, the overall picture reveals limited diversification. The continued reliance on a few key markets underscores the structural vulnerability of Australia's international education model and raises questions about the effectiveness of diversification strategies introduced in recent national policies.

Figure 2. Composition of Australia's International Student Cohort (2015–2024)



Source: Department of Education (<https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research>)

4.4 South Korea: Regional Integration and Labor Market Strategy

South Korea's approach to the IHE has been significantly shaped by domestic demographic pressures, labor market mismatches, and regional development imperatives (Byun & Kim, 2011). Unlike systems primarily driven by geopolitical or financial concerns, South Korea's internationalization efforts reflect an integrated strategy to address population decline, enhance national competitiveness, and revitalize non-metropolitan regions through university reform.

Demographic Crisis and Higher Education Sustainability

South Korea faces one of the world's steepest demographic declines, with a fertility rate of 0.72 in 2023—the lowest globally (Yang, Hwang, & Pareliussen, 2024). This demographic cliff has begun to impact university enrollments, particularly in private institutions outside Seoul. Many institutions struggle to meet minimum intake quotas, with over 60% of private universities operating in non-metropolitan areas confronting financial and reputational risks due to under-enrollment (Korea Times, 2025).

The government recognizes international students not only as academic assets but as a potential labor force reservoir (Ishikura & Tak, 2024). This framing shifts the rationale for internationalization from global prestige to domestic economic sustainability, with policy explicitly linking student recruitment to labor shortages in sectors such as information technology, engineering, and advanced manufacturing.

The Study Korea 300K Project: A Quantitative and Regionalized Strategy

Launched by the Korean Ministry of Education in 2023, the Study Korea 300K Project aims to attract over 300,000 international students by 2027, a dramatic increase from the 167,000 in 2022 (MOE, 2023b). However, the project is not solely about volume; it is designed to redistribute student presence from Seoul-centric universities to non-capital regional institutions. It also prioritizes students in STEM-related disciplines, addressing Korea's skills mismatch in its economic modernization plans.

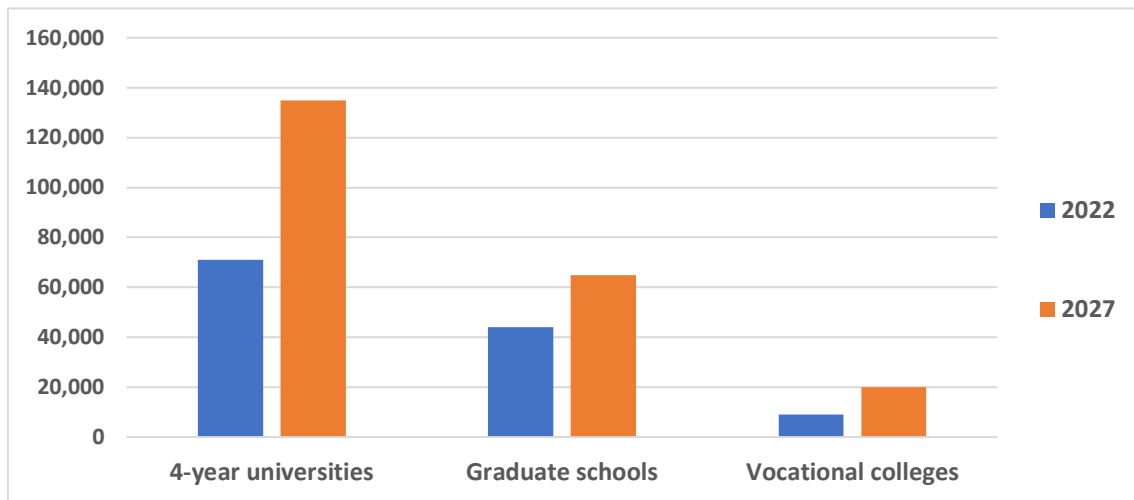
The policy's three stated goals are:

1. Stimulate regional development by attracting international students to under-enrolled areas.
2. Enhance Korea's global competitiveness through high-skill workforce development.
3. Align academic programs with national labor market needs, particularly in science and technology.

This strategy represents a clear shift from the earlier focus on branding and institutional prestige (e.g., World Class University Project) to workforce-driven internationalization.

Figure 3 illustrates the projected trajectory of international student enrollment under the Study Korea 300K Project, highlighting the ambitious scale of the government's targets through 2027.

Figure 3. Projected Growth in International Student Enrollments (2022–2027)



Source: MOE (2023b).

Glocal University 30 Project: Integrating Internationalization with Local Innovation

Complementing the Study Korea 300K initiative, the Glocal University 30 Project (2023–2027) focuses on institutional transformation in non-metropolitan universities (MOE, 2023a). The project envisions the development of “Glocal Universities”—globally competitive institutions that are rooted in local needs. This concept recognizes that internationalization must contribute not only to institutional rankings but also to local economic ecosystems.

Key elements include:

- Integration with local industry and communities.
- Selection-based funding models that reward collaboration, innovation, and societal engagement.
- Cross-ministerial cooperation, where central government ministries work with provincial authorities to redesign funding, admissions, and governance structures.

Unlike traditional excellence initiatives, which reward top-tier universities, this program seeks to decentralize innovation and avoid educational polarization.

Table 4 summarizes the major national initiatives launched since 2010 that collectively define South Korea’s evolving internationalization agenda, spanning from elite research investments to regional revitalization strategies.

Table 4: Key National Programs for Higher Education Internationalization in Korea (2010–2027)

Year	Policy/Initiative	Purpose / Focus
2010	Brain Korea 21 Plus	Graduate-level research capacity building
2013	World Class University Project (concluded)	Global competitiveness of top-tier universities
2017	New Southern Policy	ASEAN-focused diplomacy and educational cooperation
2020	University Innovation Support Program	Strengthen innovation in non-SKY universities
2023	Study Korea 300K Project	Large-scale student recruitment with STEM and regional focus
2023	Glocal University 30 Project	Regional revitalization through globally integrated institutions
2024	Local Universities Revitalization Program	Align university missions with local labor demands and specialization

Sources: Created by authors (2025) based on publicly available online information.

Regionalization and ASEAN Diplomacy: The New Southern Policy

South Korea’s New Southern Policy (NSP), initiated under President Moon Jae-in, aims to deepen ties with Southeast Asia and India, regions underrepresented in Korean higher education. At the macro level, the NSP reflects a deliberate shift in South Korea’s foreign policy. It moves beyond traditional partners, such as the

U.S., China, and Japan, to engage with Southeast and South Asia. This reorientation is shaped by shifting geopolitical priorities. This shift aligns with Korea's response to rising regional competition and a multipolar global order, especially amid growing tensions between China and the U.S. From a higher education perspective, the NSP impacts internationalization by influencing recruitment strategies, scholarship programs, and institutional partnerships. This strategy complements the labor-market logic of Study Korea 300K, as many ASEAN students are more likely to remain in Korea post-graduation, especially if offered job pathways and social support.

ASEAN inbound student mobility has increased significantly between 2016 and 2023, particularly in regional universities (Kim & Song, 2025). The policy's emphasis on People, Peace, and Prosperity (3Ps) reflects both diplomatic ambition and domestic labor planning. In practice, it has led to increased scholarship funding, curriculum localization, and joint research centers focusing on mutual industrial priorities.

Institutional and Societal Challenges

Despite robust policy frameworks, South Korea faces challenges in implementing its internationalization vision (Choi & Kim, 2025):

- Language barriers persist, particularly outside Seoul, where Korean-medium instruction dominates.
- Visa-to-work transitions remain opaque, and post-graduation employment is difficult without employer sponsorship.
- Some universities remain reluctant to shift focus from traditional domestic student recruitment.
- International student integration is uneven; social exclusion and low retention beyond graduation are recurrent issues.

Furthermore, the centralized education governance model often results in tension between innovation and bureaucratic control, especially when cross-ministerial coordination is weak.

Toward an Integrated, Sustainable Model

South Korea's redefinition of internationalization offers a model that is regionally grounded, demographically strategic, and labor-market aligned. Unlike approaches driven by prestige metrics or revenue generation, Korea's emerging paradigm aims to embed international students within a national development vision that includes aging population mitigation, regional balance, and knowledge-driven growth.

The focus on non-metropolitan revitalization—through Glocal Universities and targeted mobility pathways—signals a potential “post-elite” turn in international education strategy, whereby success is measured not by institutional rankings, but by long-term societal impact.

4.5 Japan: Quality-Oriented and Risk-Sensitive Approach

Japan's IHE has long been shaped by a careful balancing act between global engagement and domestic institutional conservatism. While the country has significantly expanded its inbound student mobility in recent decades, its overall percentage of international students remains modest compared to other advanced economies. Recent developments—ranging from COVID-19 disruptions to geopolitical tensions in East Asia—have led Japan to recalibrate its approach. The emerging model emphasizes quality over quantity, a more strategic and selective outbound mobility agenda, and increasing interest in digital internationalization and risk mitigation in foreign partnerships.

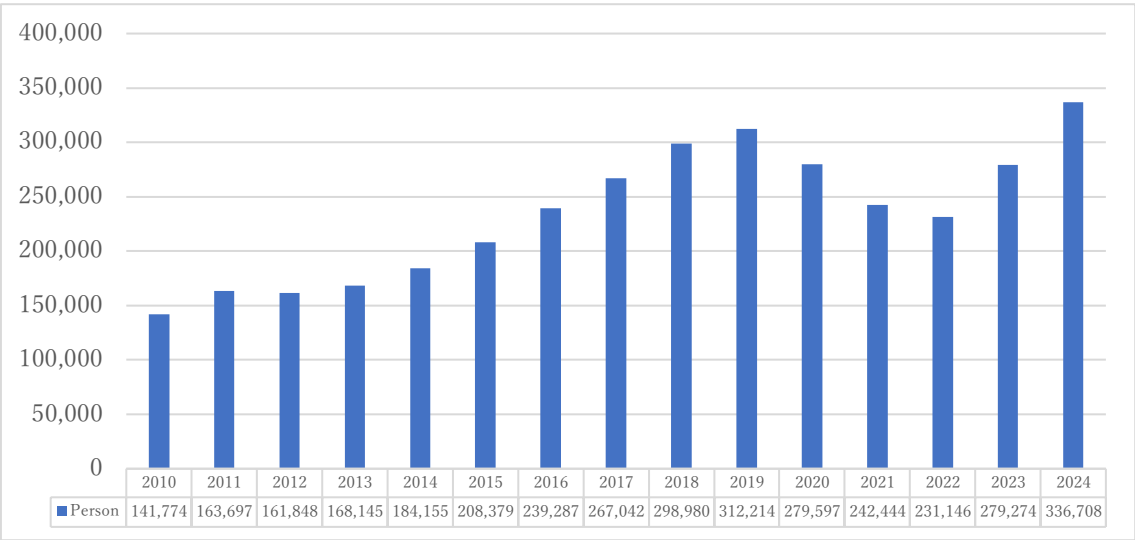
Moderate Inbound Expansion, Low Global Share

Japan has increased its total number of international students substantially since the 2000s. As of 2022, over 137,000 foreign students were enrolled in Japanese universities, with nearly 60% concentrated in non-SGU (Super Global University) institutions. However, this accounts for only about 4.7% of the total student body—well below the OECD average and significantly behind competitors such as Australia (25%), the UK (22%), and the U.S. (10%) (Huang, 2022).

This moderate global presence is attributed to multiple structural factors: language barriers, conservative curricula, limited institutional branding overseas, and underdeveloped international student support mechanisms outside

metropolitan hubs. Although initiatives such as the Global 30 Program (2009–2013) and the Super Global University (SGU) Program (2014–2023) increased visibility and institutional capacity, many institutions remain dependent on regional recruitment (mainly China and Vietnam) and offer limited global integration at the curricular level (Ishikawa, 2011).

Figure 4. Trends of Inbound International Students in Japan (2010–2024)



Source: The JASSO (2025) data at https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/ja/_mt/2025/04/data2024z.pdf

In 2023, MEXT launched the *University for International Research Excellence (UIRE)* initiative, a successor to the SGU program. While SGU emphasized broad institutional internationalization, UIRE narrows its focus to promoting cutting-edge research and global talent attraction in strategically important fields such as quantum science, AI, and biotechnology (MEXT, 2023b). Unlike SGU’s emphasis on outward visibility, UIRE includes performance-based funding and risk governance measures to safeguard sensitive research domains from foreign interference.

Strategic Outbound Diversification

In response to the limitations of inbound-centric policies, Japan has gradually re-emphasized outbound mobility, particularly since the launch of the Tobitate! Ryugaku JAPAN (Leap for Tomorrow) campaign in 2014. This initiative, backed by both public and private funding, supports Japanese students in gaining international experience, including internships, research placements, and cross-cultural programs (MEXT, 2013).

A key shift has been from general outbound promotion to targeted diversification: encouraging mobility not only to the U.S. or Europe but to Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. This aligns with Japan's broader foreign policy (e.g., Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision), and is intended to produce graduates with adaptive competencies, global problem-solving skills, and bilingual proficiency.

Outbound student numbers, which plummeted during the pandemic, have rebounded slowly but are still below peak levels (JASSO, 2025). The government has set a goal of 50,000 outbound students per year by 2030, with increasing emphasis on internships, STEM training, and sustainable development exposure.

English-Medium Instruction and “Value-Added” Mobility

Japan's effort to internationalize its academic offerings has included a push for English-Medium Instruction (EMI). Flagship institutions like the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, and Tohoku University now offer full-degree programs in English, particularly at the graduate level. The SGU initiative encouraged the proliferation of EMI courses, though implementation remains uneven. As of 2022, fewer than 20% of undergraduate programs offered meaningful EMI components outside designated international tracks.

Another emergent focus is “value-added mobility”—mobility tied to high-impact educational experiences. Programs such as Japan Gateway and Campus Asia foster trilateral exchanges between Japan, China, and South Korea, incorporating joint courses, intercultural seminars, and cross-border capstone projects. These are part of a broader effort to move beyond “credit tourism” and toward structured internationalization pathways that align with labor market and research collaboration goals (Yonezawa & Huang, 2021).

Digital Internationalization and Post-COVID Adjustments

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the limits of physical mobility-based internationalization strategies. In its aftermath, Japan has explored digital internationalization as a complementary or substitute strategy. Initiatives include:

- Virtual Exchange Programs via JASSO and top public universities.
- Online joint research hubs (e.g., Tokyo Tech and MIT).
- Hybrid joint seminars and global classrooms across the ASEAN+3 region.

These initiatives aim to democratize access to international education, particularly for students at regional or less-resourced institutions. At the same time, Japan has sought to future-proof its international collaborations through increased cybersecurity measures, data sovereignty rules, and heightened scrutiny of foreign research partnerships—particularly in AI, defense technology, and biomedical sciences.

A Cautious but Adaptive Posture

In response to rising concerns about research integrity and foreign interference, MEXT issued the *2020 Guidelines on the Management of Research Funds and Foreign Influence*. These guidelines emphasize the need for universities to develop internal governance systems to assess international research risks, particularly in areas with dual-use potential or involving sensitive technological data (MEXT, 2020). While Japan has avoided the more aggressive security interventions seen in the U.S. or Australia, it has quietly institutionalized risk-monitoring frameworks. To illustrate, Japanese universities, and MEXT itself, have increasingly adopted a cautiously adaptive approach to the geopoliticization of higher education. Compared to more assertive models (e.g., China or Australia), Japan emphasizes continuity, consensus-building, and incremental reform. This is evident in:

- Deliberate diversification of partnerships, especially in Southeast Asia.
- Maintenance of collaborations even with geopolitically sensitive countries (e.g., academic diplomacy with China despite strained bilateral politics).
- Preference for risk mitigation over competitive escalation in research security.

While this risk-sensitive posture slows down bold reforms, it contributes to institutional stability and public trust in higher education governance.

In summary, Japan's internationalization approach has matured from numeric targets and reputational branding to a more quality-oriented, inclusive, and security-conscious model. Emphasis is now placed on meaningful outbound experiences, curricular internationalization, and digital engagement, alongside efforts to maintain academic sovereignty and protect sensitive research fields.

However, challenges remain. Internationalization is still concentrated in a handful of elite institutions; many regional universities lack resources or strategic capacity to globalize. Student integration and diversity also remain weak, with limited systemic support for international student employment or social inclusion.

Japan's evolving model demonstrates that internationalization does not have to mirror Western commercial logics. Instead, it can be gradual, context-sensitive, and aligned with national values of social cohesion, regional engagement, and academic integrity.

5. Comparative Discussion

The comparative study (Table 5) synthesizes how five major higher education systems—China, the U.S., Australia, South Korea, and Japan—have recalibrated their internationalization strategies in response to a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape. Each country illustrates a distinctive, yet interconnected model shaped by national priorities, external pressures, and institutional capacities.

China's strategic emphasis on global space-making This reflects the exercise of strong national agency within a shifting global order, consistent with the glonacal agency heuristic. China's central government actively shapes internationalization through mechanisms like BRI and the Double First-Class Plan, demonstrating a top-down model of glonacal influence. reflects its ambition to construct an alternative academic order less dependent on Western norms. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in education and the Double First-Class Plan, China promotes regional academic networks and global research leadership (Huang, 2018). These efforts are framed not only as development

tools but also as instruments of discourse power. However, intensifying U.S.-China rivalry and technological decoupling have led China to impose tighter controls over international collaboration, especially in sensitive areas like AI and biotechnology. The state's dual imperative—to expand global presence while safeguarding ideological and technological sovereignty—defines a model of managed openness.

The U.S., by contrast, has moved from a leadership-based model of open engagement to a more securitized and selective form of internationalization. Post-2017 policies emphasize national security and STEM talent retention, particularly through tighter visa rules and the China Initiative. While elite universities still advocate for inclusive globalism, federal policy increasingly prioritizes screening, risk assessment, and geopolitical alignment. The country's reliance on international talent in science and engineering collides with concerns over espionage, intellectual property theft, and domestic political pressure, resulting in fragmented policy implementation.

Australia exemplifies the risks of a market-driven model. Its international education sector—once the country's third-largest export—was highly exposed to geopolitical disruptions due to an overreliance on Chinese students. The COVID-19 pandemic and diplomatic fallout with China prompted a strategic shift toward diversification, evident in the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021–2030. This approach emphasizes regional partnerships, risk management, and resilience-building through student mix diversification and Indo-Pacific realignment. Australia's policy trajectory demonstrates how middle powers must balance economic imperatives with shifting political alliances.

South Korea takes a labor-market-aligned approach. Facing acute demographic decline and regional university attrition, the Korean government integrates internationalization with national development goals. The Study Korea 300K and Glocal University initiatives aim to attract foreign students to STEM programs and underpopulated areas, tying global engagement to domestic workforce and innovation policies. Korea's model is pragmatic, inward-looking in motivation but global in method, reflecting the use of internationalization as a tool for regional equalization and labor strategy (Choi & Kim, 2025).

Finally, Japan’s internationalization has adopted a quality-focused and risk-sensitive posture. While it hosts a large number of inbound students in absolute terms, its international student ratio remains low by global standards. Japan emphasizes outbound diversification, English-medium instruction, and “value-added” mobility programs, such as trilateral cooperation through CAMPUS Asia. The pandemic accelerated interest in digital internationalization, and geopolitical concerns have prompted cautious engagement in sensitive research areas. Japan’s strategy reflects a high degree of institutional continuity and gradualism, driven by stability, quality assurance, and domestic consensus.

Together, these cases reveal that the IHE has evolved into a highly differentiated, politically entangled, and strategically responsive field. The interplay between national resilience, regionalism, and global competitiveness is now central to shaping international education policy. Figure 5 illustrates this trend, mapping how core drivers—such as labor shortages, geopolitical rivalry, economic risk, and technological nationalism—redefine institutional strategies and national agendas alike.

Table 5: Key Drivers and Policy Logics of IHE under Geopolitical Change

Country	Strategic Emphasis	Major Risk Response	Key Instruments
China	Global space-making	Tech decoupling, discourse control	BRI, Double First-Class
USA	Security and STEM dominance	Talent loss, bilateral tensions	Visa rules, talent retention policies
Australia	Market diversification	Overdependence on China	Indo-Pacific strategy, student mix
Korea	Labor-market alignment	Demographic & regional inequality	Study Korea 300K, Glocal University
Japan	Strategic outbound & quality	Low mobility, geopolitical tension	SGU, digital mobility

Source: Created by Authors (2025).

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the IHE is undergoing a profound transformation. No longer guided by assumptions of openness and universalism, IHE has become a policy arena defined by strategic selectivity, security concerns, and alignment with national development objectives.

Despite their unique trajectories, the five countries examined in this study exhibit several common patterns. First, internationalization is increasingly regionally anchored—as seen in Australia’s Indo-Pacific focus and Korea’s ASEAN partnerships. Second, digital and hybrid forms of mobility are gaining ground, particularly in Japan and China, as tools for reducing physical and geopolitical risks. Third, the role of governments and central agencies has expanded, with internationalization becoming more tightly linked to national interests and risk mitigation.

These shifts suggest the need for a reimagined framework for internationalization:

First, for policymakers, future strategies should move beyond enrollment metrics and economic returns to emphasize diversification, ethical partnerships, and resilience against global disruptions. Second, for institutions, internationalization must be aligned with institutional missions, investment in digital infrastructure, and regional innovation ecosystems while preserving core academic values. Third, for researchers, this evolving landscape calls for deeper engagement with geopolitical theories and comparative methodologies to analyze how internationalization intersects with power, sovereignty, and global inequality.

While this study focuses on five major systems, future research should explore additional regional contexts (e.g., Europe, Africa, Latin America) and institutional-level dynamics. Moreover, further inquiry into the lived experiences of international students and faculty navigating this shifting terrain would provide valuable perspectives.

In conclusion, internationalization is no longer a homogenizing force but a differentiated, context-specific response to global uncertainty. Building more

ethical, flexible, and resilient models of academic engagement is imperative for navigating this new geopolitical era.

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