

Transforming Higher Education through Internationalization: A Comparative Study of Kazakhstan and China Based on Neo-Institutional Theory

Arayli Dalelova^{1*}, Pan Mengni², Guo Dongyu³, Wang Wenzhuo⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Department of Philosophy and Political Science, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, The Republic of Kazakhstan

Abstract— In the era of globalization, the internationalization of higher education has become a pivotal strategy for enhancing the quality and competitiveness of universities. This study investigates the transformation of the educational process in the context of internationalization, focusing on Kazakhstan and China as comparative case studies. Employing literature analysis and case study methods, the research examines how internationalization influences institutional strategies, curriculum innovation, and cross-border collaboration. The study first explores theoretical perspectives on internationalization, emphasizing its role in fostering pedagogical reforms and intercultural exchange. It then analyzes the distinct yet convergent paths of Kazakhstan and China, where both nations seek to modernize their higher education systems while preserving cultural identity and meeting global benchmarks. Findings reveal that China prioritizes global talent attraction and technological advancements, while Kazakhstan emphasizes regional partnerships and multilingual education reforms. Despite progress, challenges such as resource inequalities and balancing global and local demands persist. This research enriches the understanding of internationalization's impact on education, offering practical insights for policymakers and academic leaders striving to optimize higher education transformation in a globalized context.

Index Terms— Internationalization, Higher Education, Educational Transformation, Comparative Study, Kazakhstan, China, Curriculum Innovation, Globalization.

1. Introduction

A. Background of the Study

The internationalization of higher education has become a defining feature of the 21st century, profoundly reshaping the structures, functions, and goals of universities. This process reflects the increasing interconnectedness of global economies, the rapid advancement of digital technologies, and the growing demand for a workforce equipped with global competencies. Across the world, higher education institutions are transforming their approaches to curriculum development, faculty recruitment, student mobility, and international partnerships to align with the imperatives of globalization.

Kazakhstan and China are particularly compelling contexts for exploring the impact of internationalization on higher education. Situated along the historical Silk Road and strategically integrated into the contemporary Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), these countries are uniquely positioned at the crossroads of East and West. China's rise as a global educational powerhouse has been accompanied by significant investments in building world-class universities, advancing technological innovation, and fostering global talent exchange. In contrast, Kazakhstan, a regional leader in Central Asia, has adopted policies emphasizing multilingual education, regional collaboration, and cultural exchange to modernize its higher education system. These differing strategies provide an opportunity to analyze how internationalization manifests in diverse socio-political and economic contexts.

B. Problem Statement

While the internationalization of higher education has attracted substantial scholarly attention, much of the existing research has been centered on Western institutions and models. The experiences of non-Western nations, particularly in emerging economies like Kazakhstan and China, remain underexplored. These contexts offer valuable insights into how internationalization is interpreted, adapted, and operationalized within unique cultural and institutional frameworks.

Despite their differences, both Kazakhstan and China face shared challenges in aligning their educational systems with global standards while safeguarding national identity and cultural heritage. However, comparative studies of these two countries are limited. Leask and Bridge (2013) have emphasized the importance of understanding internationalization as a context-dependent process, yet the experiences of countries outside the dominant Western paradigm have often been overlooked. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of internationalized education.

C. Objectives and Scope

This study aims to investigate how internationalization

*Corresponding author: 651354617@qq.com

drives the transformation of higher education processes in Kazakhstan and China. It seeks to analyze the strategies employed by universities in these two nations to balance global demands with local priorities, as well as to identify the opportunities and challenges that arise in the process. By adopting a comparative perspective, the research contributes to the broader discourse on the implications of internationalization for non-Western educational contexts.

The scope of this study is deliberately focused on the transformation of educational processes, including curriculum design, institutional policies, and cross-border collaborations. By emphasizing these elements, the research provides a comprehensive examination of how internationalization reshapes higher education in Kazakhstan and China (Serikkaliyeva *et al.*, 2019).

D. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing discourse on the internationalization of higher education. It offers a comparative perspective that highlights both the convergences and divergences in Kazakhstan and China's approaches to educational transformation. As Foskett (2010) note, the motivations, strategies, and outcomes of internationalization vary significantly across contexts, reflecting the diverse priorities and constraints of different nations. By focusing on two non-Western countries with distinct educational systems and strategic objectives, this research challenges the dominance of Western-centric models in the field.

Moreover, the findings of this study have practical implications for policymakers, academic leaders, and educators. They provide insights into effective strategies for navigating the complexities of internationalization while addressing local needs and values. For emerging economies seeking to enhance their global educational standing, this research offers valuable lessons on the opportunities and potential pitfalls of adopting internationalized approaches.

2. Literature Review

The internationalization of higher education has become a prominent area of academic inquiry, reflecting its critical role in shaping educational systems, policies, and practices worldwide. Scholars have extensively debated the conceptual frameworks, driving forces, and implications of internationalization, providing a rich foundation for understanding its transformative effects. This chapter reviews the relevant literature, focusing on theoretical perspectives, the global and regional contexts of internationalization, and specific insights into the cases of Kazakhstan and China (Muratshina, 2018).

A. Theoretical Perspectives on Internationalization

The concept of internationalization in higher education has evolved significantly over time, with researchers proposing various definitions and frameworks to capture its complexity. Knight (2012) defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension

into the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education. This definition emphasizes the multidimensional nature of internationalization, encompassing not only mobility programs and partnerships but also the reconfiguration of curricula, research agendas, and institutional strategies.

Sally (1994) further highlight that internationalization is not a uniform process but rather a highly contextual phenomenon influenced by national priorities, institutional capacities, and global dynamics. They categorize the motivations for internationalization into academic, political, cultural, and economic dimensions. These motivations often intersect, creating a complex interplay of forces that drive higher education institutions to engage with the global academic community. For instance, academic motivations include enhancing research quality and institutional reputation, while economic motivations often revolve around generating revenue from international students and programs.

Theoretical models have also explored the varying approaches to internationalization. Beelen and Jones (2015) identifies two broad strategies: "internationalization at home" and "internationalization abroad." The former focuses on integrating global perspectives within domestic campuses, including curricular reforms and intercultural training, while the latter emphasizes cross-border activities such as student and faculty mobility, international branch campuses, and collaborative degree programs. These strategies reflect the diverse ways institutions engage with the global education landscape, adapting to their unique contexts and objectives.

B. Global and Regional Trends in Internationalization

The globalization of higher education has been accompanied by significant shifts in the priorities and practices of universities worldwide. In many developed countries, internationalization has become a cornerstone of national education policies, driven by the pursuit of academic excellence, cultural diplomacy, and economic competitiveness. Institutions in the United States, Europe, and Australia have historically dominated the global education market, attracting large numbers of international students and fostering transnational research collaborations. However, the landscape is rapidly changing, with emerging economies playing an increasingly prominent role.

In Asia, the internationalization of higher education has gained momentum as countries seek to position themselves as regional and global leaders in education. Governments have invested heavily in developing world-class universities, establishing scholarship programs, and promoting student mobility. China, in particular, has emerged as a key player in this domain, leveraging its economic and technological strengths to enhance its global educational footprint. The establishment of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has further reinforced China's commitment to fostering international collaboration in education, particularly with neighboring countries.

Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, represents a unique context for studying internationalization. As a region with historical ties to both Europe and Asia, Central Asia has sought to leverage its strategic location to enhance cross-border

educational exchanges. Kazakhstan, as the leading nation in the region, has implemented ambitious reforms to modernize its higher education system, emphasizing multilingual education, regional integration, and cultural diplomacy. These efforts reflect a broader trend of emerging economies adopting innovative strategies to navigate the challenges and opportunities of internationalization.

C. Insights into Kazakhstan and China

Kazakhstan and China present distinct yet complementary cases for examining the impact of internationalization on educational transformation. In Kazakhstan, the government has prioritized the alignment of its higher education system with international standards, particularly through the adoption of the Bologna Process. This initiative has facilitated the standardization of degree structures, credit transfer systems, and quality assurance mechanisms, enabling greater compatibility with European higher education systems. Additionally, Kazakhstan has emphasized the promotion of multilingual education, with policies aimed at enhancing proficiency in Kazakh, Russian, and English. These reforms reflect a strategic effort to balance national identity with global engagement, positioning Kazakhstan as a regional hub for education and cultural exchange.

China, on the other hand, has pursued a more assertive approach to internationalization, leveraging its economic and geopolitical influence to reshape the global education landscape. The government has invested heavily in initiatives such as Project 211 and Project 985 (Costa & Zha, 2020), aimed at developing world-class universities capable of competing on a global scale. China has also emerged as a major destination for international students, particularly from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Programs such as the Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road Initiative have further strengthened China's role as a global leader in education and cultural diplomacy.

Despite their successes, both Kazakhstan and China face significant challenges in their internationalization efforts (Дуйсекина & Ашинова, 2020). Resource disparities, regional inequalities, and cultural tensions often complicate the implementation of internationalization strategies. Additionally, the need to balance global aspirations with local priorities remains a persistent issue, requiring careful navigation of competing demands and expectations.

The literature on the internationalization of higher education provides valuable insights into its theoretical foundations, global and regional trends, and specific manifestations in Kazakhstan and China. While both countries have made substantial progress in transforming their educational systems, their approaches reflect the diverse ways in which internationalization is interpreted and operationalized in different contexts. By synthesizing these insights, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of internationalization and its implications for higher education transformation.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology serves as the backbone of any

academic study, shaping its framework and guiding its processes. This chapter details the methodological approach adopted in this research, focusing on the use of literature analysis and the case study method. By employing these qualitative research techniques, this study aims to investigate the transformation of educational processes in the context of internationalization, using Kazakhstan and China as illustrative examples. These methods allow for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the topic, providing insights into the theoretical and practical dimensions of internationalized higher education.

A. Literature Analysis

Literature analysis is a fundamental research method that involves systematically reviewing and synthesizing existing scholarly works to uncover patterns, themes, and gaps relevant to the research topic. In this study, literature analysis serves as the foundation for understanding the broader context of internationalization in higher education and its implications for educational transformation.

The literature analysis begins with the identification of relevant academic sources, including journal articles, books, policy reports, and conference proceedings. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the themes of internationalization, educational transformation, and the specific contexts of Kazakhstan and China. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the review, databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar were utilized, along with specialized repositories focusing on higher education and regional studies.

The process of literature analysis involves critical evaluation and synthesis. Each source is analyzed for its theoretical contributions, methodological approaches, and empirical findings. Particular attention is given to studies that explore the mechanisms and outcomes of internationalization in non-Western contexts, as these provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Kazakhstan and China. Additionally, the literature review seeks to identify recurring themes and contrasting perspectives, thereby building a nuanced understanding of the subject.

Through literature analysis, this study constructs a theoretical framework that informs the subsequent case study analysis. It situates the research within the broader academic discourse, highlighting its relevance and contribution to the field. Moreover, the literature review identifies gaps in the existing knowledge base, which this study aims to address by focusing on the comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and China.

B. Case Study Method

The case study method is a qualitative research approach that involves an in-depth investigation of specific instances or examples to explore complex phenomena within their real-world contexts. In this study, the case study method is employed to examine the transformation of educational processes in Kazakhstan and China under the influence of internationalization. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of the similarities and differences between the two

countries, shedding light on the unique strategies, challenges, and outcomes associated with their respective approaches to internationalization.

The selection of Kazakhstan and China as case studies is purposeful and strategic. Both countries are situated in regions of geopolitical significance and have adopted distinct yet complementary strategies for integrating internationalization into their higher education systems. Kazakhstan, as a Central Asian nation with deep historical ties to both Europe and Asia, provides a compelling example of how regional and global influences intersect in shaping educational policies and practices. China, as a major global power and a leading player in international education, offers a contrasting perspective that reflects the ambitions and complexities of large-scale educational reform.

Data collection for the case studies relies on secondary sources, including policy documents, official reports, academic publications, and statistical data. These sources provide a comprehensive view of the institutional, national, and regional contexts in which internationalization occurs. Particular emphasis is placed on analyzing policy initiatives, such as Kazakhstan's adoption of the Bologna Process and China's Belt and Road Initiative, as these reflect the strategic priorities and aspirations of each country.

The case study analysis follows a structured approach, beginning with an overview of the historical and socio-political contexts of higher education in Kazakhstan and China. It then delves into specific aspects of educational transformation, including curriculum development, student mobility, faculty exchange, and institutional partnerships. By comparing these dimensions across the two case studies, the analysis identifies common trends as well as context-specific variations, providing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The use of case studies also allows for the exploration of causal relationships and underlying mechanisms. For instance, the analysis examines how internationalization policies influence institutional behavior, academic practices, and student experiences. It also considers the broader implications of these changes for national development and regional integration. Through this detailed examination, the case study method contributes to the generation of insights that are both contextually grounded and theoretically relevant.

C. Integration of Methods

The combination of literature analysis and the case study method enhances the robustness and depth of the research. While literature analysis provides a broad theoretical foundation and contextual background, the case study method offers a focused and empirical exploration of the research topic. Together, these methods enable a comprehensive examination of the transformation of educational processes in the context of internationalization, balancing abstract conceptualization with concrete analysis.

The integration of these methods also facilitates triangulation, a process that strengthens the validity and reliability of the research findings. By cross-referencing insights from the literature with empirical observations from the

case studies, the research ensures that its conclusions are well-substantiated and reflective of multiple perspectives. This methodological synergy contributes to the overall credibility and academic rigor of the study.

The methodological approach adopted in this study, combining literature analysis and the case study method, provides a robust framework for investigating the transformation of educational processes in Kazakhstan and China. These methods enable a nuanced and multidimensional exploration of the research topic, addressing both theoretical and practical dimensions. By grounding the analysis in a rich body of literature and focusing on two illustrative case studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics and implications of internationalization in higher education.

4. Research Results

The research findings presented in this chapter derive from a comprehensive analysis of the educational transformation processes in Kazakhstan and China within the context of internationalization. These findings are structured around the key dimensions of internationalization observed in the two case studies, highlighting how this process has shaped institutional strategies, policy frameworks, and academic practices. By focusing on these elements, the study provides a detailed exploration of the impact of internationalization on higher education in the two countries, identifying both commonalities and unique developments.

The transformation of higher education in Kazakhstan has been characterized by a deliberate effort to align its system with global standards, especially through the adoption of international frameworks. The country's active participation in the Bologna Process has played a pivotal role in this transformation, introducing standardized degree structures, credit transfer mechanisms, and quality assurance protocols. These reforms have not only facilitated academic mobility but also enhanced the compatibility of Kazakhstani degrees with those in Europe, making its institutions more attractive to international students and fostering cross-border academic exchanges. The emphasis on multilingual education has further strengthened these efforts, enabling students to engage effectively in a global academic environment while preserving national linguistic and cultural identity.

Similarly, institutional strategies in Kazakhstan have reflected a strong focus on international collaboration. Universities have actively pursued partnerships with foreign institutions, resulting in joint degree programs, faculty exchange initiatives, and collaborative research projects. These collaborations have provided valuable opportunities for knowledge transfer, capacity building, and the development of cutting-edge academic programs. Moreover, the introduction of international accreditation processes has further aligned Kazakhstani universities with global quality standards, enhancing their reputation and competitiveness in the international education market.

In China, the transformation of higher education under internationalization has been shaped by the government's

strategic initiatives aimed at global leadership in education. Policies such as Project 211 and Project 985 have prioritized the development of world-class universities (Lin & Wang, 2022), emphasizing high-impact research, faculty excellence, and advanced infrastructure. These initiatives have propelled Chinese universities onto the global stage, enabling them to compete with established institutions in terms of academic quality and innovation. The Belt and Road Initiative has further reinforced China's role in global education, facilitating partnerships with institutions across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East and fostering cultural and academic exchanges.

China's approach to internationalization has also placed significant emphasis on attracting international students. Through targeted scholarship programs, simplified visa processes, and the expansion of English-taught courses, China has become a leading destination for international students. These efforts have not only diversified the student population but also enriched the academic and cultural environment within Chinese universities. Additionally, outbound mobility programs have provided Chinese students with opportunities to gain global exposure, enhancing their employability and intercultural competencies.

The transformation of curricula in both Kazakhstan and China has been another significant outcome of internationalization. In Kazakhstan, the incorporation of global perspectives into curricula has been accompanied by an emphasis on interdisciplinary learning and innovative teaching methods. Courses are increasingly designed to address global challenges, such as sustainability and technological advancement, while maintaining a focus on local relevance. Similarly, in China, curriculum reform has involved the integration of international standards, with a particular focus on fostering critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability. These changes reflect a broader shift toward equipping students with the skills and knowledge required to thrive in an interconnected world.

Faculty development has also emerged as a critical aspect of educational transformation in both countries. In Kazakhstan, internationalization has encouraged academic staff to engage in professional development programs, participate in international conferences, and collaborate on global research projects. These opportunities have enhanced faculty expertise and expanded their professional networks, contributing to the overall quality of education. In China, similar trends are observed, with faculty members increasingly involved in international collaborations and research initiatives. The emphasis on recruiting world-class academics and fostering international research partnerships has further elevated the stature of Chinese universities.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain in the implementation of internationalization strategies. In Kazakhstan, resource constraints and regional disparities have often hindered the consistent application of reforms across institutions. Smaller universities, particularly those in rural areas, face difficulties in accessing the resources and infrastructure required for effective internationalization. Additionally, the balance between global integration and the preservation of national identity continues to be a complex

issue, necessitating careful policy design and implementation.

China, too, faces challenges in its internationalization efforts. The rapid expansion of international programs has sometimes outpaced the development of adequate support systems for international students, leading to issues related to academic integration and cultural adjustment. Moreover, the political and cultural context in China has occasionally created tensions between global aspirations and domestic priorities, requiring universities to navigate a delicate balance between openness and control.

Overall, the findings highlight the transformative impact of internationalization on higher education in Kazakhstan and China. Both countries have made substantial progress in enhancing the global competitiveness of their universities, fostering academic collaboration, and preparing students for the demands of a globalized world. However, the distinct approaches and challenges observed in each case underscore the importance of context-specific strategies in realizing the full potential of internationalization. By examining these dynamics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the processes and outcomes of educational transformation in the context of internationalization.

5. Research Significance and Limitations

The study explores the transformation of educational processes in the context of internationalization, using the cases of Kazakhstan and China. This chapter discusses the broader significance of the research and acknowledges its inherent limitations, providing a balanced assessment of its contributions to academic and practical knowledge while outlining areas for future exploration.

A. Research Significance

The research offers theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented insights into the transformation of higher education in a globalized world. Its comparative approach, focusing on Kazakhstan and China, contributes to a nuanced understanding of how diverse sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts influence the internationalization of higher education.

From a theoretical perspective, the study enriches the academic discourse on internationalization by examining non-Western models of educational transformation. Much of the existing literature on internationalization has traditionally focused on Western higher education systems, often overlooking the unique approaches and challenges faced by countries like Kazakhstan and China. By addressing this gap, the research provides a more inclusive and comprehensive framework for understanding global trends in higher education. Furthermore, the study's integration of case study and literature analysis methods demonstrates the importance of combining theoretical and empirical approaches in academic inquiry.

Practically, the findings have direct implications for higher education institutions in Kazakhstan, China, and beyond. By identifying effective strategies and highlighting challenges in the implementation of internationalization policies, the study offers actionable insights for university administrators and educators. For instance, the research underscores the value of

fostering institutional partnerships, enhancing faculty development, and designing curricula that balance global and local priorities. These lessons can inform the development of robust internationalization frameworks that are adaptable to diverse institutional and national contexts.

At the policy level, the study contributes to the formulation of evidence-based strategies for integrating internationalization into national higher education systems. The insights gained from Kazakhstan and China can guide policymakers in crafting policies that promote global engagement while addressing local needs and priorities. For example, the study's emphasis on balancing global integration with the preservation of cultural and linguistic heritage provides valuable guidance for countries navigating the complexities of internationalization.

Moreover, the research has broader social and economic implications. By examining how internationalization enhances the quality of education, fosters intercultural understanding, and prepares students for global citizenship, the study highlights the transformative potential of higher education in addressing societal challenges. The findings also underscore the role of internationalized education in driving economic development through the cultivation of a skilled and globally competitive workforce.

B. Research Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. These limitations stem from the scope of the research methods, the availability of data, and the inherent complexities of the research topic.

First, the study relies primarily on qualitative methods, namely literature analysis and case studies. While these methods are well-suited to exploring the depth and complexity of educational transformation, they may lack the statistical generalizability associated with quantitative research. The findings, therefore, offer rich insights but may not be directly applicable to all contexts or countries. Future research could incorporate mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to enhance the generalizability and robustness of the findings.

Second, the study is based on secondary data collected from academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. While these sources provide valuable information, they may not capture the full spectrum of perspectives, particularly those of students, faculty, and other stakeholders directly involved in the internationalization process. Primary data collection through interviews, surveys, or focus groups could provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of these stakeholders.

Third, the focus on Kazakhstan and China, while offering valuable comparative insights, limits the study's geographic scope. The findings are influenced by the unique historical, cultural, and political contexts of these countries and may not fully reflect the dynamics of internationalization in other

regions. Expanding the scope to include additional case studies from other countries or regions could provide a broader perspective on the diversity of internationalization practices and outcomes.

Lastly, the study addresses the transformation of educational processes within the higher education sector but does not extensively explore the impact of these transformations on broader societal or economic outcomes. While the research highlights the potential implications of internationalized education, a more detailed analysis of these broader effects could enhance the study's relevance and impact.

The significance of this research lies in its ability to illuminate the complex and multifaceted nature of internationalization in higher education, particularly in the non-Western contexts of Kazakhstan and China. By contributing to theoretical understanding, offering practical insights, and informing policy development, the study advances the global discourse on educational transformation. However, its limitations point to the need for further research that builds on its findings, incorporates diverse methodological approaches, and expands its geographic and thematic scope. Addressing these limitations in future studies will ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with the internationalization of higher education.

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