

Comparative Internationalization in Asian Higher Education: Ten-Year Developments, Contemporary Trends, and Future Trajectories Based on Bibliometric Study

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse the distribution of academic publications on the topic of internationalization in Asian Higher Education based on year, country, thematic focus, publication source, and keywords. Using a bibliometric approach with the PRISMA protocol, data was collected from the Scopus database, resulting in a final dataset of 1,296 articles and conference proceedings published between 2015 and 2025. VOSviewer software was used to visualise author networks and keyword evolution. Findings show a significant surge in research productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating the resilience of this topic. Geographically, China dominates as the main source, while networks in Southeast Asia and West Asia remain relatively fragmented. Thematically, there has been a paradigm shift, with early research focusing on market-based mobility and neoliberalism (2015–2017), shifting to digital adaptation during the pandemic, and more recently evolving towards ‘cultural competence’, “innovation” and ‘sustainability’ (2023–2025). These results suggest that internationalization in Asia is moving beyond physical mobility towards a more substantial focus on curriculum quality and global sustainability goals. Therefore, this study recommends the need for equitable collaboration to reduce regional dominance, as well as a reorientation of research policy that prioritises sustainability impact over mere quantity metrics.

Keywords: Internationalization, Higher Education, Asia, Bibliometrics.

Introduction

Internationalization has evolved as a strategic way for higher education institutions (HEIs) to respond to globalization. Through cross-border learning, mobility, and partnerships, it has become a key tool for nations to exchange knowledge, promote institutional quality, and emphasize their position in the global educational scene. Today, universities are more connected than ever to the global knowledge economy. To stay relevant, they are incorporating internationalization into their core functions of teaching and research (Altbach et al., 2019).

Beyond institutional competitiveness, internationalization plays a vital role in broader global commitments to sustainable development goals (SDGs). In particular, it aligns

with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). As Lim (2024) argues, internationalization transforms tertiary education into an open ecosystem of shared knowledge, mobility and cooperation. Through cross-border partnerships, HEIs can enrich their curricula with global perspectives, strengthen pedagogical innovation and at the same time expand access to diverse learning resources. Furthermore, by incorporating indigenous knowledge and promoting inclusive mobility, internationalization can help bridge the divide between academic 'centers' and 'peripheries.' This fosters global citizenship and a more equitable way of producing knowledge. Supporting this, Krcal et al. (2021) highlight that these partnerships act as catalysts for the SDGs, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), by mobilizing collective expertise and resources. While financial and monitoring challenges remain, such collaborations create real value through mutual learning and institutional reform.

In practice, internationalization has evolved from a narrow focus on student exchanges into a multidimensional ecosystem of policies and activities. Jane Knight's (2004, 2012) conceptualization remains a vital guide to define internationalization as an intentional process that integrates international and intercultural dimensions into the heart of higher education. Within this framework, internationalization encompasses both mobility-based initiatives and campus-based strategies. Today, HEIs actively build connections through academic mobility, joint research, and global academic competitions, all of which not only facilitate knowledge exchange but also strengthen institutional networking and capacity. Importantly, the rise of "internationalization at home" has opened new doors. By integrating global perspectives into the curriculum, institutions can nurture global competencies in all students. This ensures that intercultural learning is inclusive and accessible even for those who cannot travel abroad.

The urgency and form of internationalization are particularly evident in the Asian higher education context, where systems vary widely in their historical trajectories, socio-cultural roots, and economic development. Over the past few decades, Asia has seen a rapid and diverse expansion of higher education, marked by a growing presence in global academic networks. However, internationalization in the region is far from uniform or linear. While Knight's definition provides a useful lens, scholars emphasize that Asian

HEIs navigate internationalization through their own unique political and cultural conditions. For instance, Marginson (2011) highlights how Confucian traditions shape governance in East Asia, while Mok and Wu (2016) point to the role of education in social mobility and labor market formation across the Asia-Pacific. In Southeast Asia, internationalization often focuses on regional cooperation, development-oriented agendas and capacity building rather than just market competition (Caballero Andaluz, 2020). Consequently, looking at Asia through a comparative lens is essential. It allows us to see how global frameworks of internationalization meet local priorities; and thus helping scholars move beyond Western-centric models and assumptions (Huang, 2007; Yonezawa et al., 2014).

The evolution of higher education internationalization further underscores the need for such comparative and contextualized inquiry. Early critical scholarship, notably Altbach's (1977) analysis of dependency and neocolonialism, exposed how international academic relations could reinforce global inequalities rather than promote mutual exchange. During the early 2000s, internationalization became increasingly associated with economic rationales, including revenue generation, global rankings, and international student recruitment. These developments prompted growing concern regarding the purposes and values underpinning internationalization. Brandenburg and de Wit (2011) famously questioned whether internationalization had "lost its way," calling for a re-centering of academic and educational values. Subsequent reviews documented diversification in internationalization strategies but noted the persistence of market-oriented logics (Ilieva, 2014). More recent scholarship reflects a gradual discursive shift toward inclusivity, reciprocity, sustainability, and social responsibility (de Wit, 2019; Zhang & Cao, 2024). More recently, Bağcı (2026) highlights that the future direction of higher education internationalization requires critical reflection on dominant narratives and practices. The study emphasizes the need to move beyond traditional market-oriented approaches by considering issues of equity, sustainability, and the broader social purposes of internationalization. Studies of international academic mobility further reveal differentiated trajectories shaped by structural power relations rather than purely economic motivations, reinforcing the importance of context-sensitive analysis (Gérard & Lebeau, 2023).

Despite the growing volume of research on higher education internationalization, significant gaps remain between conceptual frameworks, policy rhetoric, and institutional practice. While international activities continue to expand globally, scholars highlight persistent challenges such as overreliance on mobility, unequal participation, and the dominance of market-driven rationales (de Wit, 2011; de Wit & Deca, 2020). Critical perspectives argue that internationalization often reproduces power asymmetries instead of fostering genuine reciprocity or social responsibility (Altbach & de Wit, 2015; Stein, 2021). These tensions are particularly pronounced in low-income and peripheral contexts, where institutions face structural constraints and limited agency, raising questions about coercion versus intentional engagement in internationalization processes (Teferra, 2019; Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). Moreover, much of the existing literature focuses on strategies and outcomes rather than examining how internationalization is conceptualized, justified, and prioritized across different regions and time periods (Yemini & Sagie, 2016). As a result, empirical evidence remains fragmented, especially with respect to non-Western and Asian contexts.

These gaps directly inform the objectives of the present study. To address uneven global participation and thematic concentration within internationalization research, this study first examines the distribution of publications by year, country, and thematic focus. Second, in response to critiques regarding the concentration of academic influence and knowledge production, the study analyzes the progression of publication sources contributing to the field over time. Third, drawing on calls for more ethical and reflective approaches to internationalization the study explores the evolution of research keywords to capture shifts in dominant discourses, priorities, and conceptual frameworks. Together, these research questions enable a systematic examination of how internationalization has developed over the past decade within the Asian higher education context.

To achieve these aims, this study employs a bibliometric approach. Unlike traditional narrative or systematic reviews, which focus on synthesizing specific arguments and empirical findings, bibliometric analysis provides a quantitative map of how knowledge is produced, shared, and evolved over time. These techniques allow researchers to visualize global and regional trends, identify influential voices, and uncover emerging research clusters that might otherwise remain hidden (Bales et al., 2020; Li & Mahadi,

2024). By analyzing citation patterns and keyword co-occurrences, bibliometric studies reveal the hidden bridges between authors, journals, and core concepts (Martí-Parreño et al., 2016; Van Eck et al., 2010). Accordingly, this study uses bibliometric analysis to provide a comprehensive, comparative and longitudinal overview of internationalization in Asian higher education. Thus, contributing empirical clarity to ongoing theoretical and policy debates.

Literature Review and Previous Studies

Literature Review

University internationalization has been most consistently framed through Knight's conceptual work, which has evolved alongside changes in global higher education. The internationalization of universities has been largely defined by Knight's conceptual framework, which has developed in response to shifts in global higher education. Initial definitions framed internationalization as a collection of components and milestones integrated into teaching, research, and service activities (Knight, 1994, 1999). These definitions demonstrated a managerial and activity-focused perspective on internationalization, emphasizing institutional strategies over educational results. This viewpoint was subsequently enhanced by Knight's well-known definition of internationalization, which describes it as a process of incorporating international, intercultural, and global aspects into the goals, roles, and administration of higher education (Knight, 2003, 2004). This definition continues to be a fundamental element in the area and offers a common analytical basis for research and policy.

With the escalation of internationalization worldwide, Knight (2008, 2011, 2012) scrutinised the chaos surrounding the idea, pinpointing fallacies like the reduction of internationalization to just student mobility, revenue generation, or worldwide rankings. These criticisms emphasized the dangers of using internationalization as a tool and overlooking its educational and societal goals. In light of evolving global circumstances, Knight (2021) broadened the framework by integrating ethical factors, values, and societal implications, indicating a transition from competitiveness-focused models to more responsible and inclusive approaches to internationalization.

Additional viewpoints have broadened Knight's framework by questioning its mainly Western focus. Beelen and Jones (2015) presented the idea of internationalization at home, highlighting curriculum development, learning achievements, and intercultural skills for every student, including those who do not engage in physical mobility. This method reconceptualizes internationalization as a comprehensive educational experience instead of an exclusive endeavor. In a similar vein, critical scholars like de Wit (2019) and Altbach and de Wit (2015) contend that internationalization frequently reinforces global inequalities, favoring institutions in the Global North and sidelining local contexts and knowledge systems.

Empirical research by Yemini and Sagie (2016) further illustrates how national settings influence internationalization rationales and practices, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing internationalization within particular political, cultural, and institutional frameworks. Together, these frameworks indicate that internationalization is now viewed not just as cross-border activity but as a multifaceted process rich in values that interacts with curriculum, equity, governance, and global power dynamics. This theoretical foundation offers an essential perspective for analyzing current internationalization methods beyond superficial metrics.

Previous Studies

The existing research on the internationalization of higher education primarily consists of systematic literature reviews, bibliometric studies, and specific case analyses that outline global patterns, regional trends, and thematic progressions. These studies together show the swift growth of internationalization research since the early 2000s, while also highlighting ongoing conceptual and geographical disparities.

Cheung's (2021) systematic analysis of internationalization in Southeast Asia offers significant regional perspectives. The research indicates that the region's internationalization policies are primarily influenced by governmental agendas and economic reasons, highlighting the importance of student mobility, transnational collaborations, and institutional competitiveness. Nevertheless, Cheung points out a significant lack of representation regarding curriculum internationalization, equity, and pedagogical transformation in the existing literature. This discovery indicates that

internationalization in Southeast Asia is largely outward-looking and focused on policy, with little emphasis on internal academic transformation.

On a global scale, bibliometric analyses provide a broad perspective on research patterns. Li and Mahadi (2024) record a consistent rise in academic publications regarding the internationalization of higher education, highlighting key themes such as international student movement, strategic management, quality assurance, and global rankings. Likewise, the *Bibliometric Analysis of Global Research Trends on Higher Education Internationalization* published in *Sustainability* (MDPI) states that research output has increased substantially since the early 2000s, with significant contributions from North America, Europe, and East Asia. These studies show that research on internationalization is significantly focused in specific areas and journals, highlighting issues of uneven knowledge creation.

Focusing specifically on Asia, Thi Thu Le et al. (2024) conduct a comprehensive Scopus-based bibliometric analysis covering publications from 2003 to 2022. Their findings show increasing research activity across Asian countries, reflecting the region's growing engagement with internationalization agendas. However, the study also reveals that Asian scholarship continues to rely heavily on Western theoretical frameworks, particularly Knight's models, with limited development of context-specific theories. This theoretical dependence suggests that while internationalization practices are expanding regionally, conceptual innovation remains constrained.

Research on the internationalization of the curriculum further refines this landscape. The bibliometric study published in the *European Journal of Educational Research* maps the intellectual structure of curriculum-focused internationalization research and identifies a gradual shift toward learning outcomes, intercultural competence, and pedagogical approaches. Despite this shift, the study notes that curriculum internationalization remains less empirically developed compared to mobility-focused research, indicating a gap between theoretical advocacy and institutional practice.

In contrast to large-scale reviews, Msomphora's (2024) decade-long case study offers in-depth insights into the practical challenges of internationalising higher education at the

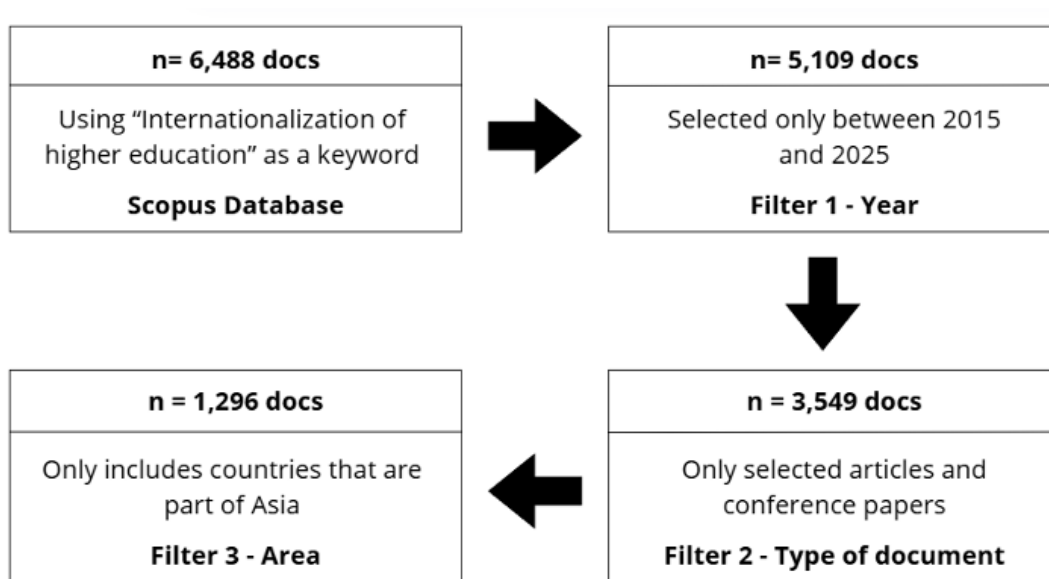
institutional level. The study highlights persistent constraints such as limited resources, staff capacity, and contextual misalignment between global models and local realities. This case-based evidence underscores the limitations of macro-level analyses, which often overlook the complexities of implementation within specific institutional and national contexts.

Taken together, previous studies demonstrate that while internationalization research has expanded significantly in scope and volume, it remains dominated by policy-driven, mobility-focused, and Western-centric perspectives. The growing body of bibliometric and systematic reviews provides valuable trend mapping but often lacks critical engagement with educational outcomes, curriculum transformation, and contextual diversity. These gaps point to the need for research that integrates theoretical frameworks with contextualised empirical analysis, particularly in non-Western higher education settings.

Method

This study utilises a bibliometric approach, in which we selected Scopus as the primary database due to its reputation as one of the largest databases covering high-quality journals (Van Doorslaer, 2015). The selection of Scopus was also based on its rich metadata, which enabled us to track author networks and keyword trends more accurately than other databases. The data collection process was carried out using a stepwise screening protocol or PRISMA to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the documents screened (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1: Application of the PRISMA model in the data collection process



The first step began with a broad search using the umbrella keyword ‘Internationalization of higher education’. At this initial stage, the Scopus search engine detected a total of 6,488 documents discussing this topic globally. This figure shows that the issue of internationalization is indeed a hot topic in the global academic arena. However, as our goal is to look at current trends, we need to limit the time frame so that the data analysed is not too broad.

Therefore, in the first stage of filtering, we limited the search to only the last decade, namely the period from 2015 to 2025. This restriction reduced the amount of data to 5,109 documents. The reason for choosing this decade is simple: this period covers the pre-pandemic period, the COVID-19 crisis, and the post-pandemic recovery era, which are crucial moments in the changing patterns of global higher education.

Furthermore, to maintain the quality and scientific weight of this analysis, we applied a filter based on document type. We specifically selected only documents of the Article and Conference Paper types, while excluding other types of documents such as review books or editorials. This step was taken to ensure that each unit of data we analysed was the result of original research that had undergone a peer-review process. This process further filtered the data into 3,549 documents ready for geographical selection.

The most critical stage in this method is context localisation. As the focus of this study is on comparisons in Asia, only documents originating from Asian countries were selected. We included 43 specific countries and territories, ranging from major contributors such as China, Japan, and India, to developing countries in Southeast Asia (such as Indonesia and Vietnam), Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel). We ensured broad representation from East Asia to West Asia to obtain a complete picture.

After going through this rigorous geographical selection process, we obtained a final result of 1,296 documents. This final data set was then exported and processed using VOSviewer software. Through this tool, the raw data was visualised into a bibliometric network map to answer questions about geographical distribution, author collaboration patterns, and the evolution of research topics.

Based on this explanation, the inclusion criteria were: (1) topic; (2) time; and (3) region. In terms of topic, documents must contain explicit discussion of internationalization in the context of higher education, not primary or secondary education. In terms of time, we only accept manuscripts published between 2015 and 2025 to ensure the information is up to date. However, the most crucial inclusion criterion is the geographical aspect; we require that the documents have author affiliations from a list of 43 Asian countries that we have determined.

Conversely, for the exclusion criteria, we exclude secondary types of documents such as book series, review articles, and editorials. We want to ensure that this bibliometrics is built on a foundation of research that presents new empirical data, not just reviews or editorial opinions. In addition, documents with undefined country metadata or those outside the 43 target countries, even if they discuss Asian topics, are automatically eliminated from the final dataset to maintain consistency in regional focus.

Result

The distribution of publications based on year, country, and thematic focus

Figure 2: Documents by Year

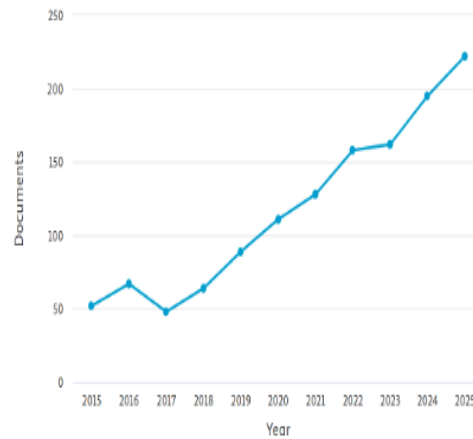
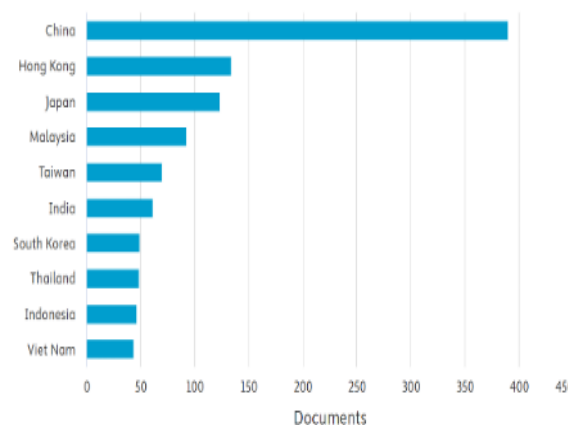


Figure 3: Documents by Country



The dynamics of scientific productivity as shown in Figure 2 regarding the internationalization of higher education in Asia reveal an interesting growth trajectory over the past decade. In the early observation period (2015–2017), the volume of publications was fluctuating and tended to be stagnant, even experiencing a decline to its lowest point in 2017 with less than 50 documents. However, this pattern changed dramatically after 2018, when the graph began to show a consistent linear increase. The most significant surge occurred from 2020 to 2025, when the number of publications continued to rise sharply, exceeding 200 documents per year. This phenomenon is quite unique considering that the period from 2020 to 2022 coincided with a global pandemic

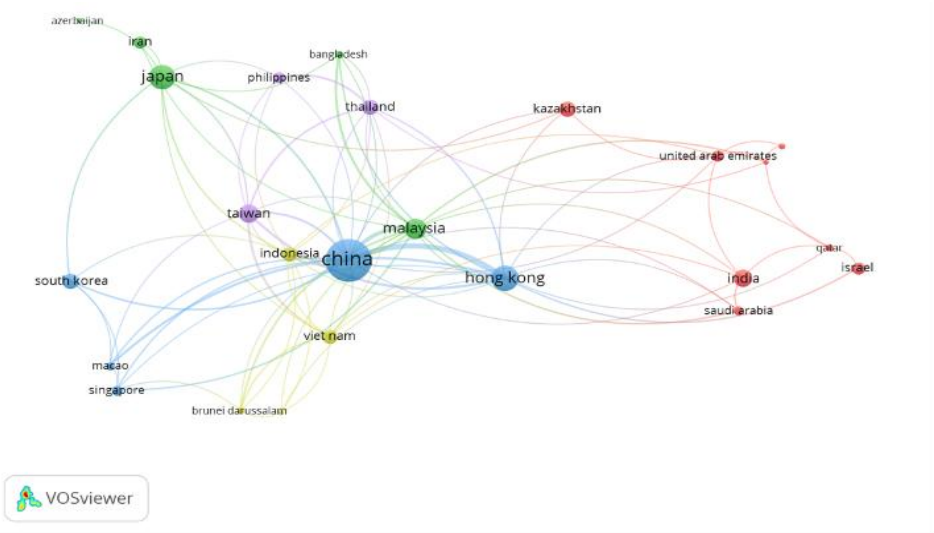
that restricted physical mobility.

Meanwhile, the distribution by country in Figure 3 and Table 1 shows that China stands as the main hub with a publication volume of nearly 400 documents, far exceeding the combined output of Hong Kong and Japan, which are in second and third place. However, outside of East Asian hegemony, this data also highlights the central role of Malaysia, which has managed to separate itself from other developing country clusters. Meanwhile, countries such as India, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam form a competitive group with relatively equal output.

Table 1: 5 Countries with the Most Publications on the Topic

Country	Documents
<i>China</i>	389
<i>Hong Kong</i>	133
<i>Japan</i>	123
<i>Malaysia</i>	92
<i>Taiwan</i>	69

Figure 4: Co-authorship visualization map based on country

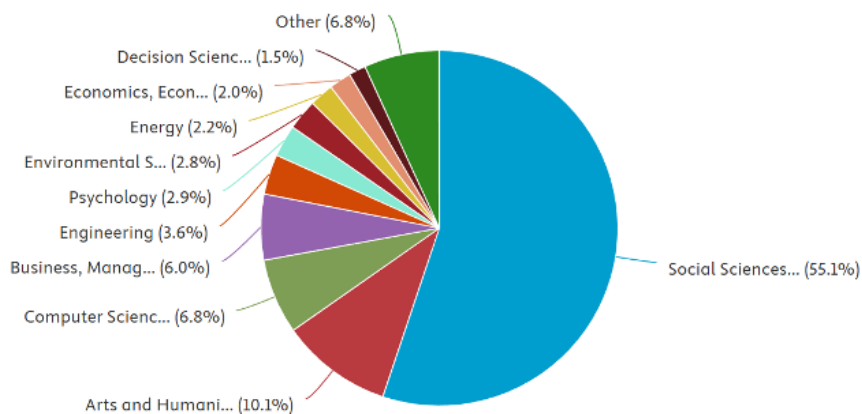


Furthermore, the co-authorship visualisation map shows that China (blue nodes) functions as a research hub in Asia. China not only dominates in terms of volume, but also forms an axis with Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea. However, more complex

dynamics are seen outside East Asia, where regional blocs are forming. For example, India (red node) has emerged as a dominant actor consolidating networks in West and South Asia, becoming a key link for Middle Eastern countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar) and Central Asia (Kazakhstan). Meanwhile, the landscape of Southeast Asia is divided into two sub-clusters. Malaysia and Japan (green nodes) form a strategic alliance that embraces Thailand and the Philippines, while Indonesia and Vietnam (yellow nodes) form their own cluster.

On the other hand, a review of the distribution of disciplines in Figure 5 reveals that the discourse on the internationalization of higher education in Asia is still strongly rooted in the Social Sciences, with a dominant percentage of 55.1%. This dominance is followed by Arts and Humanities at 10.1%. However, there is a very interesting shift in trend in the second layer of subject distribution, where Computer Science ranks third with a contribution of 6.8%, surpassing Business and Management at 6.0%. The presence of Engineering at 3.6% also shows that this topic is becoming increasingly multidisciplinary.

Figure 5: Documents by subject area



The contribution of publication sources to the field

Outside Hong Kong, the institutional map shows fierce competition between Chinese academic powerhouses and other regional players. Beijing Normal University and Zhejiang University are the main representatives of China. However, it is worth noting the presence of Universiti Sains Malaysia in sixth place, which has managed to emerge

amid East Asian dominance as the sole representative of Southeast Asia.

Figure 6: Documents by affiliation

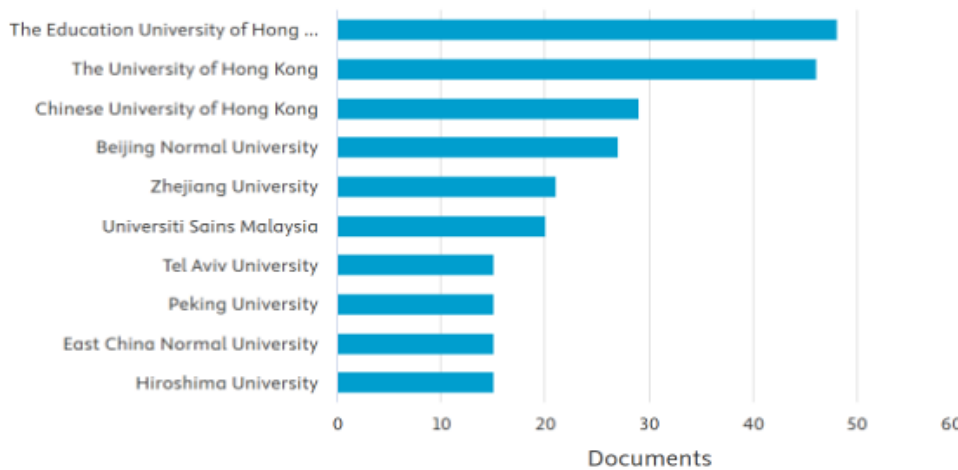
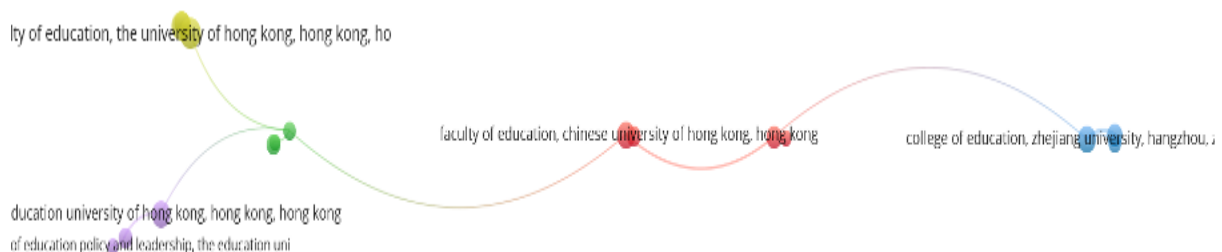


Figure 7: Network Structure in Affiliates



The topology of inter-institutional collaboration shows that the connectivity formed is more intra-institutional than cross-campus. For example, the relationship between the Faculty of Education and its parent university, as in the cluster of The Education University of Hong Kong. The only significant pattern of external connectivity is again centred on the Hong Kong ecosystem, which forms a linear chain of collaboration between The University of Hong Kong, The Education University of Hong Kong, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (green, purple, and red clusters). Meanwhile, Zhejiang University (blue cluster) from China appears to stand alone at the end of the spectrum with a network that is disconnected from the Hong Kong cluster.

In the context of sources in Figure 8, publications are dominated by the Higher Education journal (blue line) and the Journal of Studies in International Education (red line). Higher

Education shows the most impressive growth trajectory, moving from a moderate position at the beginning of the period to then climbing aggressively and reaching its peak in 2024 with nine documents. In contrast, the Journal of Studies in International Education shows a pattern of extreme volatility, falling dramatically in 2020 (only 1 document) before rising significantly towards 2025. In addition, the most striking phenomenon emerges from Higher Education Research and Development (turquoise line), which shows a sharp jump in 2023 to 7 documents in just one year.

Figure 8: Documents per Year by Source

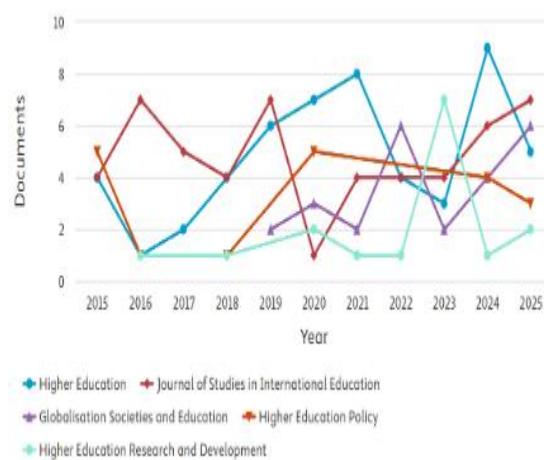
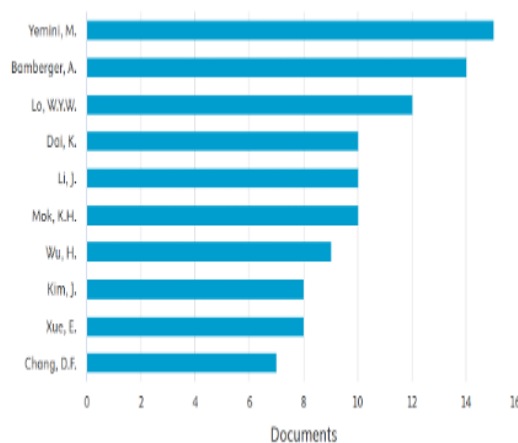


Figure 9: Documents by Authors



The map of individual contributions in Figure 9 highlights Miri Yemini and Annette Bamberger, who lead by a narrow margin, producing 15 and 14 documents respectively. However, if we look at the next layer, from third to tenth place, the writing landscape

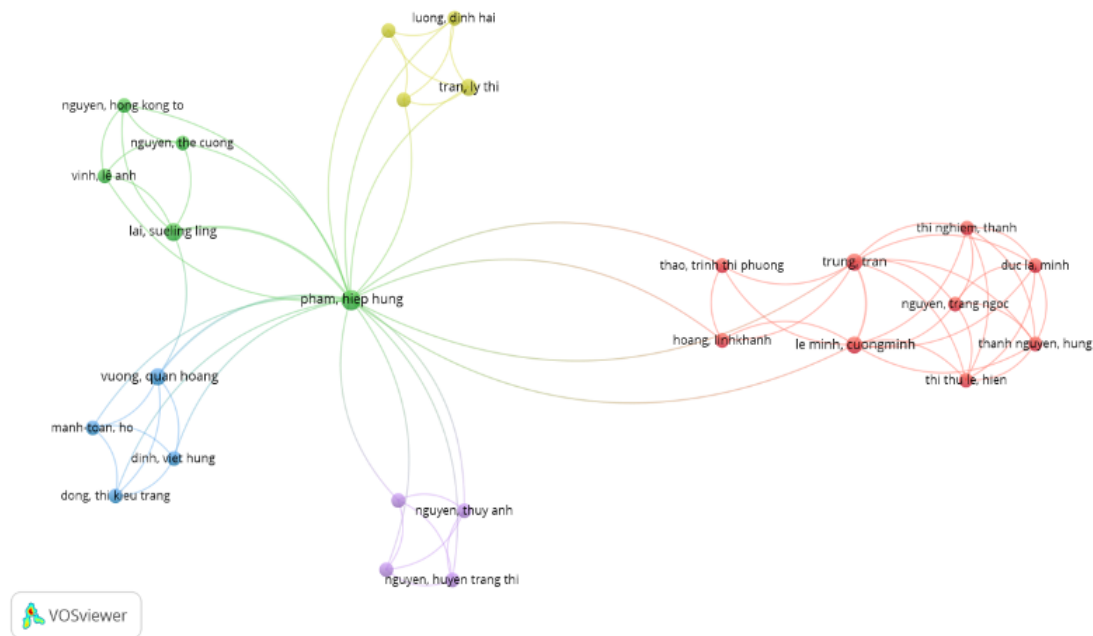
once again shows the absolute dominance of researchers rooted in the East Asian context. Big names such as William Y.W. Lo (12 documents) and Ka Ho Mok (10 documents) are central figures who have long been known for their critical analysis of higher education policy and transnational governance in the region.

Table 2: Author with the Most Citations

Author	Citations	Documents
yemini, m.	421	15
bamberger, annette	289	14
wu, hantian	273	9
morris, paul	223	5
li, jian	179	10
xue, eryong	179	10
abd razak, nordin	126	6
shafaei, azadeh	126	6
zheng, jie	72	5
chen, lilan	33	5

Furthermore, a review of citation metrics as shown in Table 2 reveals Miri Yemini's position with a total of 421 citations from 15 documents, or as a primary reference in internationalization studies. Meanwhile, Paul Morris, despite producing only 5 documents (one-third of Yemini's volume), managed to obtain 223 citations. In the second tier, the pair Li, Jian and Xue, Eryong have identical figures (10 documents, 179 citations), as do the pair Abd Razak, Nordin and Shafaei, Azadeh (6 documents, 126 citations). However, Wu, Hantian, with 9 documents, managed to collect 273 citations, a much higher number than Li and Xue, who had more publications.

Figure 10: Author Network Structure



Meanwhile, Figure 10 shows the structure of collaboration between authors, in which researchers from Vietnam stand out for having a very large collaboration network, with Pham, Hiep Hung at its centre. Pham appears to be the main author driving various other groups of authors (coloured circles around him), ranging from red to blue. Furthermore, the dominance of Vietnamese names here indicates that the country's productivity is driven by strong internal collaboration.

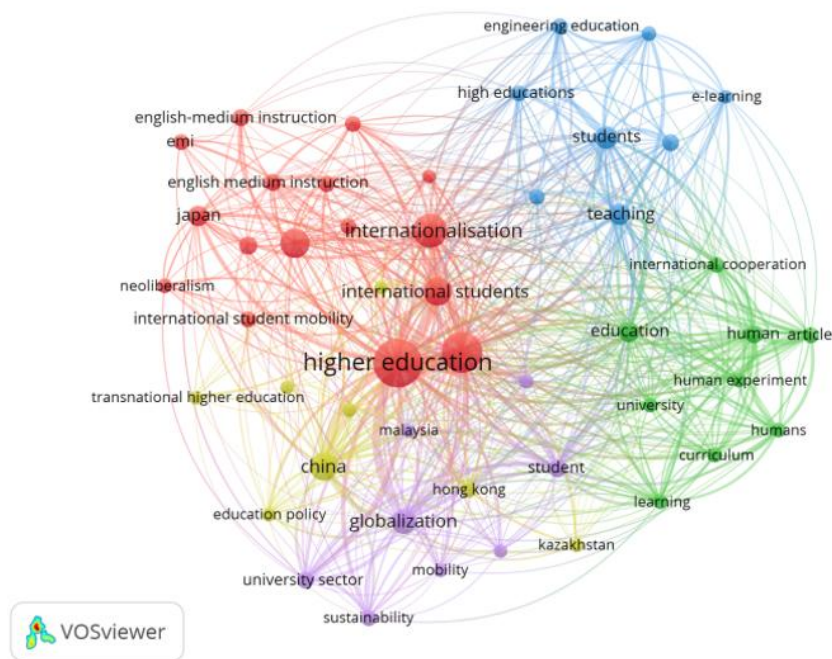
The evolution of research keywords over time

In the analysis of top keywords as shown in Table 3, when we combine the spelling variants ‘internationalization’ (278) and “internationalization” (169), the total frequency reaches 447 times, rivalling ‘higher education’ (436) itself as the top keyword. However, the most critical finding is the position of ‘China’ (111) as the only country entity that made it into the top ten. Meanwhile, although ‘globalisation’ (85) is present as an external structural context, researchers' attention seems to be increasingly focused on actors in the field. This can be seen from the combined frequency of ‘students’ and “student”, which totals 103 occurrences, as well as the appearance of ‘teaching’ (55) in the top ranks.

Table 3: Top 10 Keywords

Keyword	Occurrences
higher education	436
internationalization	278
internationalization	169
china	111
globalization	85
students	64
human	39
education	53
teaching	55
student	39

Figure 11: Network Visualization

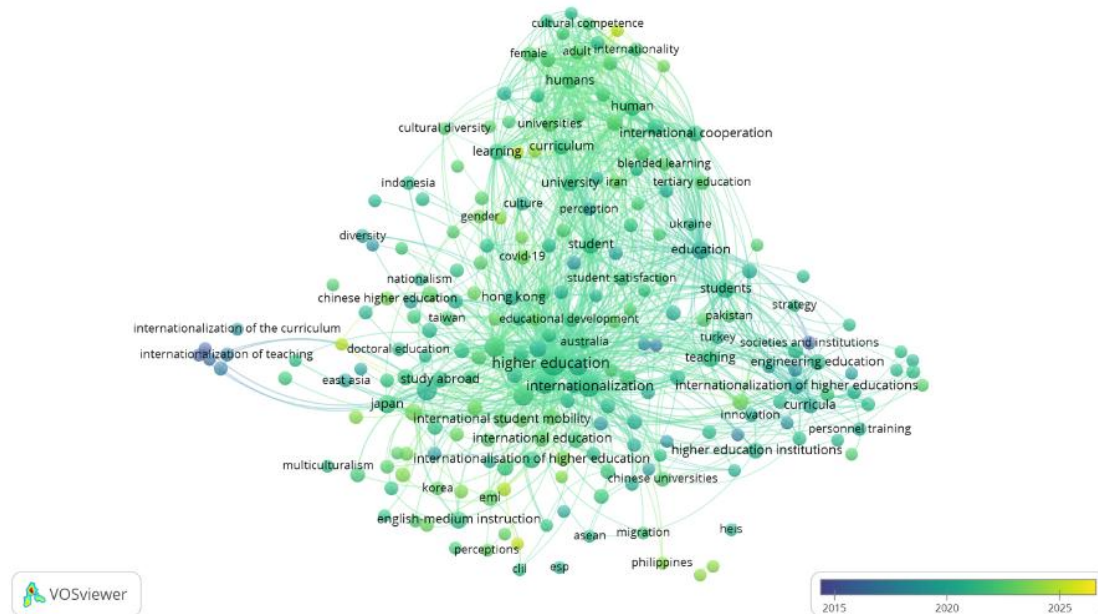


Meanwhile, network visualisation through VOSviewer as seen in Figure 11 shows that on the left side (red cluster), research is still strongly rooted in the traditional paradigm of ‘mobility and markets’, characterised by dominant nodes such as international students, English-medium instruction (EMI), and neoliberalism. This contrasts with the

right side of the map (blue and green clusters), where the emergence of engineering education, e-learning, and curriculum clusters confirms that researchers are now more concerned with how internationalization is changing teaching methods and curriculum content in technical terms.

Furthermore, the strategic position of the yellow cluster, which shows that the China node is directly connected to transnational higher education and the university sector in the purple cluster, indicates that the TNE (Transnational Education) model in Asia is highly dependent on strong state regulation. Most interesting for the future trajectory is the presence of the sustainability node, which is beginning to appear at the bottom (purple cluster). This marginal yet connected position signifies that sustainability issues (SDGs) are in the process of transitioning from a minor topic to a major agenda that will redefine the meaning of ‘internationalization’ in the next decade, no longer a matter of competition, but rather collaboration for global sustainability.

Figure 12: Overlay Visualization

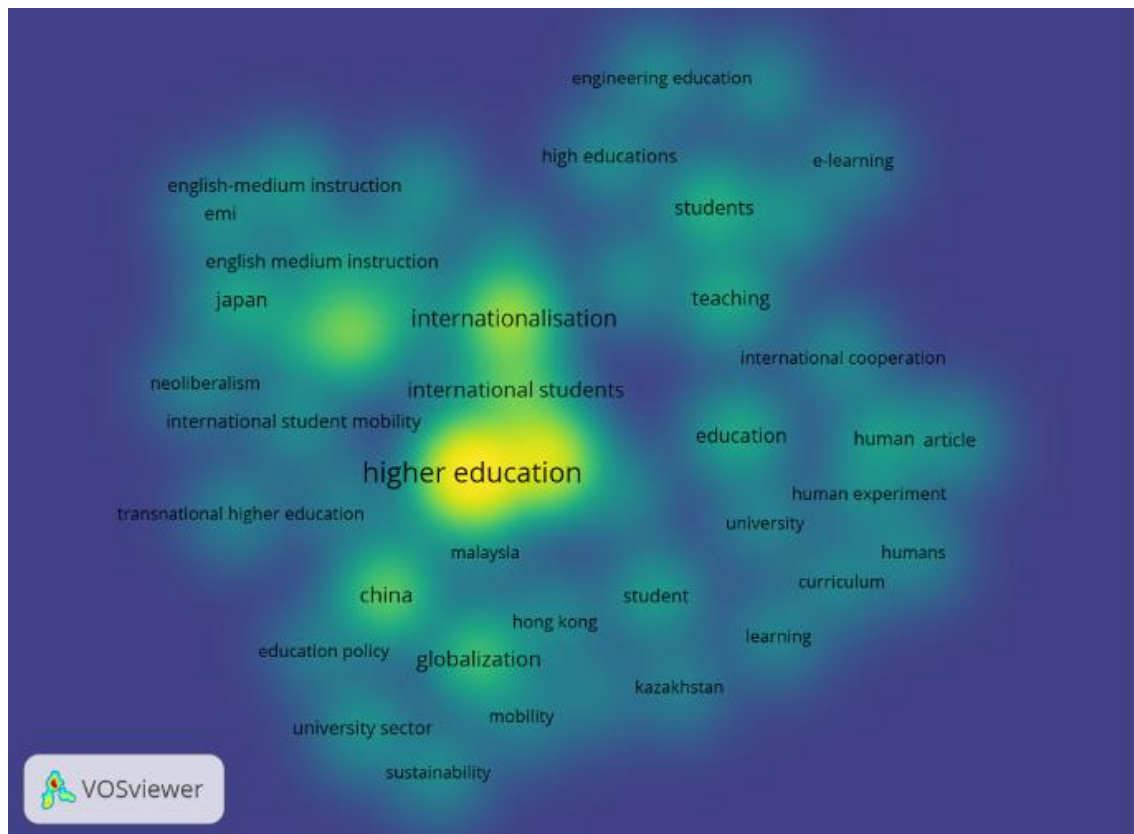


Furthermore, the overlay visualisation in Figure 12 shows that the dark blue and purple nodes (2015-2017) represent research that focuses more on basic foundations such as the internationalization of the curriculum and the internationalization of teaching, which are located on the left edge. Then, the colour shifts to green (the pandemic period), where the

topics become very technical and reactive, such as the emergence of COVID-19, online learning, and the adaptation of English-medium instruction (EMI).

However, the most interesting part is the bright yellow nodes (2023-2025). Here, new keywords such as cultural competence, learning, and innovation appear, which are quite prominent at the top and bottom. This is a strong signal that the research trend is changing direction, from simply discussing the physical movement of students to discussing the meaning of that movement. Researchers are now more concerned with whether students truly possess cultural competence and good learning skills, rather than simply counting how many international students are enrolled.

Figure 13: Density Visualization



The density visualisation map in Figure 13 shows what is popular and what is still neglected in this research. The bright yellow colours clustered in the centre, particularly around the words Higher Education, Internationalisation, and China, indicate that the majority of researchers are still focusing on broad and general topics. Conversely, more specific topics such as sustainability or curriculum appear faint and submerged in dark

blue at the edges. This indicates that although there has been a lot of research in this field, the discussion has not gone into much technical depth and is still dominated by superficial discussions of general policy and student mobility.

Discussion

This bibliometric study is to examine ten-year developments, contemporary trends, and future trajectories of internationalization in Asian higher education. Rather than merely reiterating descriptive patterns, this discussion interprets the empirical findings by situating them within the broader structural, institutional, and thematic dynamics of the region. The discussion is organised around three core dimensions: temporal and geographic dynamics, institutional and publication ecosystems, and the thematic evolution of research foci. These interpretations are then carefully compared with existing studies, followed by a reflection on the study's limitations.

Interpreting Temporal, Geographic, and Disciplinary Patterns

One of the most striking findings is the sustained growth of research output over the past decade, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than signalling a disruption, the pandemic years appear to have sparked intensified scholarly engagement. This pattern suggests that internationalization is increasingly seen not just as physical mobility, but as a broader institutional and pedagogical priority that remains relevant even when borders are closed. The pandemic period may therefore be interpreted as a moment when researchers reassessed existing models and explored alternatives like digital delivery, online collaboration and curriculum-level adaptations, without implying a direct causal relationship.

Geographically, China's dominance in publication volume reflects its long-standing investment in research capacity and global engagement. China's role is not only quantitative but structural and it acts as a central hub connecting multiple regional networks. At the same time, the data reveal a more differentiated Asian landscape than a simple East Asian hegemony. Malaysia's high output positions it as a notable standout among developing countries. This suggests that sustained policy attention can translate into scholarly visibility. Meanwhile, the balanced output among countries such as India, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam points to a dynamic middle tier, where

research is emerging but remains unevenly connected. The co-authorship networks further shed light on these regional dynamics. The presence of distinct clusters indicates that research in internationalization is still largely organised around regional or national circuits rather than pan-Asian integration. China's axis with Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea contrasts with India's role as a connector across South, West, and Middle Eastern regions. In Southeast Asia, sub-clusters suggest diverse research paths rather than a unified agenda. These patterns imply that while internationalization is a shared concern, its scholarly production is still shaped by regional proximity, history, and linguistic ties.

From a disciplinary perspective, the continued dominance of the Social Sciences shows that internationalization is still primarily framed through policy and governance. This aligns with the view of internationalization as a process involving institutional strategies, regulatory frameworks and human actors. However, the emergence of Computer Science suggests a gradual reframing through technological lenses. Rather than a departure from social science, this shift indicates an expanding space where digital infrastructure and online learning are increasingly vital. The presence of Engineering further reinforces the idea that research is becoming more multidisciplinary, though not yet evenly distributed.

Institutional and Publication Ecosystems: Concentration and Fragmentation

The institutional analysis highlights a clear distinction between volume-driven and ecosystem-driven knowledge production. While China leads in aggregate output, Hong Kong institutions occupy a central position in shaping the intellectual core of the field. The concentration of leading affiliations in Hong Kong suggests a highly integrated local ecosystem, where institutions collaborate closely and maintain strong pipelines in international journals. This points to the importance of research culture and language environment in shaping influence.

In contrast, Chinese institutions appear more fragmented in their collaboration networks. Although several leading universities contribute significantly to volume, their relative isolation suggests that scale does not automatically lead to integrated collaboration. This may reflect the vast size and diversity of China's system, where research is conducted across many institutions with varying strategies.

The presence of Universiti Sains Malaysia as the only Southeast Asian representative among top contributors underscores an uneven landscape. Rather than indicating regional underperformance, this highlights how institutional focus and research priorities enable visibility in a competitive field. It also suggests that leadership, rather than national context alone within the institution plays a critical role in shaping output.

The analysis of publication sources reinforces these observations. The dominance of a small number of specialised journals indicates that internationalization research remains anchored within a relatively stable publication core. At the same time, the differing growth trajectories and volatility among journals suggest that the field is responsive to external shocks and shifting academic interests. The sharp increases observed in certain journals during specific years may reflect thematic special issues, changing editorial priorities, or heightened interest in particular dimensions of internationalization.

At the author level, the distinction between productivity and citation impact provides further insight into knowledge formation. Authors with fewer publications but high citation counts demonstrate that influence in this field is not solely a function of output volume. Instead, conceptual framing, analytical depth, and relevance to broader debates appear to play a significant role in shaping scholarly impact. The author's collaboration networks also reveal that strong internal collaboration within certain national contexts, such as Vietnam, can drive collective visibility even when individual institutions are less prominent globally.

Thematic Evolution and Emerging Research Trajectories

Perhaps the most conceptually significant contribution of this study lies in its analysis of keyword evolution and thematic clustering. The prominence of “internationalization” and “higher education” as core keywords is unsurprising, yet the appearance of “China” as the only country among the most frequent keywords underscores the country’s symbolic and analytical centrality in the field. Rather than functioning merely as a case, China appears to operate as a reference point through which broader debates on policy, governance, and transnational education are articulated.

More revealing, however, is what does not dominate the keyword landscape. Traditional

markers of internationalization such as mobility, exchange, and collaboration, while present in network clusters, do not appear among the top keywords. This absence suggests a gradual shift away from defining internationalization primarily in terms of movement and numbers. Instead, the increasing prominence of keywords related to teaching, learning, cultural competence, and innovation indicates a reorientation toward qualitative and pedagogical dimensions.

The network and overlay visualisations support this interpretation. Earlier research clusters are closely associated with market-oriented and mobility-focused paradigms, including international students, English-medium instruction, and neoliberal frameworks. Over time, the emergence of clusters related to e-learning, curriculum, and engineering education reflects a growing concern with how internationalization is operationalised within teaching and learning processes. The appearance of sustainability-related keywords, although still peripheral, signals an emerging trajectory where internationalization is increasingly linked to global responsibility rather than competition alone.

Importantly, the density visualisation suggests that while the field has expanded thematically, much of the research remains concentrated around broad and general concepts. More specialised and practice-oriented themes remain underdeveloped, indicating potential directions for future inquiry rather than established shifts. This pattern reinforces the interpretation that the field is in transition, balancing established policy-focused approaches with emerging pedagogical and ethical concerns.

Comparison of Previous Studies

The findings of the five reviewed studies collectively highlight the evolving landscape of higher education internationalization, revealing both conceptual expansion and persistent structural challenges. Cheung (2021) emphasizes that in Southeast Asia, internationalization has largely been policy-driven, focusing on student mobility, transnational education, and institutional partnerships. However, the review also identifies uneven implementation across countries, with resource disparities and limited institutional autonomy constraining deeper integration of internationalization into teaching and learning practices. This suggests that while internationalization is widely

endorsed at the policy level, its operationalization remains fragmented.

Complementing this regional perspective, Li and Mahadi (2024) provide a global bibliometric overview that demonstrates a sharp growth in internationalization research over the past decade. Their analysis indicates a thematic shift from traditional concerns such as student exchange and cross-border programs toward more complex issues, including internationalization at home, digital mobility, and equity. This trend reflects a maturation of the field, where scholars increasingly question not only how internationalization occurs but also for whom it is beneficial.

Similarly, Thi Thu Le et al. (2024) show that Asian scholarship on higher education internationalization has expanded significantly, with China, Malaysia, and South Korea emerging as major contributors. Their findings underscore a growing research interest in regional collaboration and capacity building. However, the study also notes the dominance of English-language publications and Western theoretical frameworks, raising concerns about epistemic imbalance and the underrepresentation of local perspectives.

The study on the intellectual structure of internationalization of the curriculum further deepens this discussion by revealing a strong emphasis on learning outcomes, intercultural competence, and curriculum design. While this signals progress toward embedding internationalization within academic content, the findings also indicate conceptual fragmentation, with limited integration between curriculum studies and broader institutional strategies. This gap suggests the need for more holistic frameworks linking curriculum internationalization to governance and policy.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a single bibliographic database, which may not fully capture publications in regional or local journals, particularly those published in languages other than English. As a result, the findings reflect patterns of internationally indexed scholarship rather than the totality of research activity in Asia.

Second, bibliometric methods prioritise quantifiable indicators such as publication

counts, citations, and keyword co-occurrence. While these metrics are useful for identifying patterns and trends, they do not capture the substantive quality, theoretical depth, or contextual richness of individual studies. The interpretation of thematic shifts should therefore be understood as indicative rather than definitive.

Third, network visualisations are sensitive to parameter settings and thresholds applied during analysis. Different configurations may yield slightly different cluster structures, particularly for less dominant themes. Finally, the temporal scope of the study captures developments over a decade but may not fully reflect very recent shifts that have not yet accumulated sufficient publication volume.

Conclusion

This bibliometric study analyzes the progression of internationalization in higher education across Asia from 2015 to 2025. The study depicts internationalization as a complex process shaped by globalization, sustainability, and local factors, extending beyond traditional views of it as merely a market-oriented quest for student mobility. The findings indicate a growing shift towards inclusive, ethical frameworks that prioritize intercultural competency and social responsibility over Western-centric competition.

Examination uncovers several important patterns:

- **Crisis-Induced Growth:** In the last decade, the output of research has surged significantly. Remarkably, instead of serving as a discouragement, the COVID-19 pandemic ignited scientific interest.
- **Geographic Disparity:** Knowledge production is highly centralized. Countries in South and Southeast Asia remain less influential, showcasing a divided regional landscape, whereas China and Hong Kong dominate in both publications and impact
- **Consolidated Power:** A limited number of East Asian academics and certain publications possess most of the scholarly impact and references.
- **Thematic Development:** Although student mobility continues to be a primary emphasis, an evident shift towards "quality instead of quantity" is occurring. New studies are progressively highlighting the importance of teaching innovation,

sustainability, and enduring societal advantages.

In the end, although internationalization research in Asia is becoming more advanced, it continues to encounter structural inequalities

Implication and Recommendation

The findings from this study provide two main implications. First, the collaboration map shows the very strong dominance of China and Hong Kong, while countries in Southeast Asia (such as Indonesia and Vietnam) tend to work in separate groups. The implication is that if this pattern continues, the world's understanding of education in Asia will become unbalanced because it is too dominated by the East Asian perspective. This risks making the perspectives and specific needs of other developing countries less heard on the global stage. Second, changes in research keywords indicate a positive shift in mindset. Research topics no longer focus solely on market issues and the number of foreign students, but are shifting to issues such as ‘cultural competence’, ‘teaching’ and ‘sustainability’. This implies that educational institutions are now beginning to realise that the main objective of internationalization is not merely to seek economic gain, but to develop graduates who are ready to compete globally.

Based on these findings, here are some recommendations that can be given:

1. Institutions in Southeast Asia and Central Asia are advised to be more open in establishing research collaborations. Cross-regional cooperation is needed, for example, ASEAN researchers collaborating with researchers from West Asia or India, so that the knowledge map in Asia becomes more equitable and inclusive.
2. Governments and research funders in developing countries (such as Southeast Asia and Central Asia) should intervene, for example through special funding schemes that require cross-border collaboration in the region.
3. Researchers are further advised not to write only case studies about their own countries. Researchers should begin conducting comparative studies, for example, comparing policies in Indonesia with those in Vietnam or Thailand, in order to balance narratives that have been overly focused on the Chinese context.
4. These findings recommend that higher education institutions and funders begin to

change their performance evaluation systems, shifting from a focus on publication targets (quantity) to impact-based assessments or citation counts, so that researchers are encouraged to produce scientific work that is truly in-depth, mature, and relevant, which is proven to be more valued by the global community.

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