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FOCUS ON NATIONAL POLICY

Internationalization of higher education through English Medium Instruction in East Asian countries: Rationales and issues

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Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI), as defined by Madhavan (2014), involves the teaching of a subject using the English language without explicit language learning aims in a country where the native language is not English. It is rapidly spreading in the higher education (HE) sectors of Asia Pacific countries, driven by factors such as the prominence of English in trade, commerce, diplomacy, and scholarship, the expansion of the HE sectors, and government policies aimed at internationalizing HE (Walkinshaw et al., 2017). Many Asian countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, consider EMI a core strategic goal across various academic disciplines (Galloway, 2020).

Initial reports on EMI primarily centered around the European context because EMI originated in Europe with the 1999 Bologna Declaration (Walkinshaw et al., 2017). While there is a growing body of literature on EMI in Asia, research on private higher education institutions (HEIs) is scarce.

Methods

This qualitative case study aims to fill this gap by exploring the drivers and challenges related to the adoption of EMI policies in six private universities across Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan. This research employs document analysis, fieldwork, and semi-structured interviews with 45 EMI program implementers across six private universities, including senior and ju-

nior administrative officials and faculty members. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data from the interviews, utilizing NVivo 12 analysis software. Each university is coded with letters: A & B in Mongolia, C & D in South Korea, and E & F in Japan.

Country contexts:

Mongolia

The government of Mongolia played a key role in the decision-making, planning, and development processes during the socialist regime between 1920 and 1990. However, with the transition to a market economy in the 1990s, the government reduced its funding for public HEIs, leading to the establishment of numerous private HEIs. The restructuring, mergers, and closures aimed at maintaining quality resulted in 64 HEIs operating as of 2023, a decrease from 95 HEIs in 2017 (Gundsambuu, 2019).

For nearly six decades until the 1990s, Russian was the primary foreign language taught in Mongolian schools. However, in the past two decades, despite English not being an official foreign language, its importance has been increasingly highlighted in various documents. Acknowledging the significance of EMI, the government, in 2008, provided financial support to educational institutions that adopted EMI (World Bank, 2008). The ambitious aim was to position at least four Mongolian public universities among the top in Asia; this initiative, however, did not achieve its goal.





South Korea

EMI is actively promoted in national initiatives like Incheon Global Campus (2014), CAMPUS Asia (2017), and academic programs such as international studies at local universities (Park, 2018). The objectives of EMI in these programs encompass innovating Korea's education system, fostering global leaders, and enhancing the international competitiveness of Korean universities. While there is no unified EMI policy for universities in government projects, EMI is regarded as a crucial indicator for measuring internationalization efforts.

In 2023, 202 universities and 133 community colleges were operating in South Korea, with the number of universities having gradually declined due to the government's policy of university restructuring in response to the declining university-age population (Yoon, 2024). To address this decline, the Ministry of Education has initiated the 'Study Korea 300k Plan' to attract international students, which includes expanding EMI degree programs (British Council, 2023). The motivation for universities to expand EMI programs is driven by the desire to improve rankings, both internationally and domestically (Kim, 2017).

Japan

Since the establishment of the first EMI undergraduate program—implemented at Sophia University in 1949—EMI continued to grow, gaining momentum in the 1970s with the institutionalization of exchange programs at private universities across Japan (Ota & Horiuchi, 2018). The Japanese government has initiated various projects to enhance global competitiveness and internationalize HE. This includes the 'Global Talent' project, focusing on preparing skilled professionals for the global workforce (Yonezawa, 2014). Additionally, Japan's current plan aims to attract 400,000 international students by 2033 (The Asahi Shimbun, 2024).

Factors driving the growth of EMI in Japan involve the recruitment of international students (Brown, 2017) and ambitions to improve global university rankings (Bolton et al., 2022). EMI also serves as a strategic response to a shrinking student pool (Bradford & Brown, 2018) as well as to mergers/closures of universities due to lower enrollment quotas (Inaba, 2020).

Findings

This study reveals that universities D, E, and F stressed the need for domestic recognition first and then for international recognition to attract more international students due to the lower enrollment quota. Universities C, E, and F introduced their EMI programs to align with their respective government policies. Universities C and E receive funding from their government to follow its policy to prioritize internationalization. Other universities A, B, D, and F have no financial support from their government.

The rationales for introducing the EMI programs at these universities are multifaceted and can be categorized as political (University E), social/cultural (E), branding related (B & F), economic (D), and academic (all). This study utilized a typology of EMI challenges: linguistic (e.g., English proficiency of domestic and international students, faculty members, and administrative officials), cultural (e.g., academic cultural norms), administrative and managerial (e.g., admission process; the internal working language), and institutional (e.g., insufficient financial resources). All institutions encountered these challenges during EMI program implementation. Linguistic challenges were a notable concern, with other challenges posing the most significant hurdles across all six institutions. Cultural challenges were comparatively less prevalent.

Conclusion

The case study universities aim to boost international competitiveness through EMI programs. In Japan and Korea, the case study universities focused on attracting international students due to the declining domestic enrollment. In Mongolia, private HEIs pursue EMI to tap into the global market without dedicated policy. Despite the shared goal of cultivating globally competitive graduates, challenges arise from inadequate funding, leading to administrative and institutional hurdles.

This study recommends that HEIs prioritize the quality of students, especially in international recruitment, and improve teaching and learning conditions for both international and domestic faculty members and students. Future studies should incorporate the perspectives of students alongside other stakeholders' views.





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