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The Influences of External and Sideways Factors on the Introduction of English as a Medium of Instruction Programs in East Asian Countries

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Abstract

This study examines the adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education institutions in Mongolia, Japan, and South Korea, focusing on the influencing factors of global university rankings and international collaborations. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 45 implementers from six case-study private higher education institutions, the findings indicate that the global university rankings influenced the case-study universities' decision to adopt the EMI policy. Program implementers emphasized national and global university ranking systems as key external influences. Additionally, international collaboration, such as joint/dual degree programs and exchange programs with foreign partner universities, significantly impacted the adoption of EMI.

Хураамж

Энэхүү судалгаагаар Монгол, Япон, Өмнөд Солонгос улсын их сургуулиудад англи хэлээр хөтөлбөр хэрэгжүүлэх болсон шалтгаан, тэр дундаа дэлхийн их сургуулиудын зэрэглэл, их сургуулиудын хамтын ажиллагаа нь англи хэлээр хөтөлбөр хэрэгжүүлэхэд хэрхэн нөлөөлж буйг судаллаа. Дээрх улсын зургаан хувийн их сургуулийн англи хэлээр хэрэгжүүлдэг хөтөлбөрийг хариуцсан ажилтан, хичээл заадаг багш, хөтөлбөрийн захирал зэрэг нийт 45 оролцогчоос ярилцлага авч сэдэвчилсэн анализ хийв. Судалгаагаар гадаад хүчин зүйл болох дэлхийн их сургуулиудын зэрэглэл, дотоод хүчин зүйл болох гадаадын их сургуулиудтай хамтран хэрэгжүүлж буй хамтарсан хөтөлбөр, солилцооны хөтөлбөр нь англи хэлээр хөтөлбөр хэрэгжүүлэхэд жинтэй түлхэц болсон гэсэн үр дүн гарав.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction, internationalization, global university rankings, international collaborations, East Asia

Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI), defined by Madhavan (2014) as teaching academic subjects without explicit language learning aims in a country where English is not spoken by a majority of the people, is spreading rapidly throughout Asia. EMI is positioned as a core strategic goal across academic disciplines in many Asian countries (Galloway, 2020). EMI is seen as an effective way to attract international students and promote internationalization at home (Bowles & Murthy, 2020). Many other non-Anglophone Asian countries perceived this trend as a strategy to attract international students (Gundsambuu, 2019a).

Limited research has explored how global university rankings influence EMI policies of private higher education institutions (HEIs). This study investigates the influence of global university rankings on the adoption of EMI policies of private HEIs in Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan. The countries were chosen because they each provide a unique socio-economic contexts and educational systems within East Asia. This study argues that private HEIs in non-Anglophone countries embrace EMI as a survival strategy to gain national and international recognition triggered by global and national university rankings.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing from existing literature and relevant theories, this study explores possible reasons for EMI adoption, considering both external and sideways factors referred in this paper as global university rankings and international collaborations between universities. It employs Knight's (2012) rationales for internationalization and Hazelkorn's (2008, 2009) framework on the influence of rankings on the strategic and operational decisions of HEIs. These dimensions form the conceptual framework guiding data collection and analysis in this study.

Literature Review

EMI in Asia

Countries in Asia are rushing into EMI policies in higher education for several reasons (Walkinshaw et al., 2017): 1) English serves as the primary language for trade, commerce, diplomacy, and academia; 2) there is a notable expansion in the higher education sector in the Asia Pacific; and 3) policy actions of governments toward internationalization of higher education (IoHE).

Drivers of EMI can be conceptualized at various levels, from the global to the classroom (Hultgren et al., 2015). At the global level, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has prompted member states to consider higher education as a tradable service, transforming it into a commodity. Moreover, university ranking systems play a significant role as universities compete for students. This encouraged HEIs to offer more EMI programs. At the national level, governments enact various policies to promote EMI (Hultgren et al., 2015). At the institutional level, HEIs view EMI as a means to prepare domestic students for a global job market. Institutions make policy decisions regarding EMI, such as increasing international staff intake. Departments may make decisions independent of their institutions at the departmental level. Using EMI varies across academic disciplines, with departments having the autonomy to determine language policies, such as using English alongside local languages (Airey, 2014; Nguyen, 2022). At the classroom level, English often becomes the lingua franca when no students have the local or national language as their first language (Hultgren et al., 2015; Lasagabaster, 2022).

External factor—Global university rankings

From the perspective of East Asian governments, global university rankings exert significant influence on higher education policy (Deem et al., 2008). This influence often becomes a governmental pressure as rankings are appropriated in national higher education policies. Consequently, East Asian HEIs have been compelled to transform at the institutional level, including developing EMI programs (Ghazarian, 2011).

In Japan, government-driven initiatives influenced by rankings include offering financial incentives to universities and prioritizing internationalization by increasing the number of international students and providing more EMI programs (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020; Hazelkorn, 2009). Similar initiatives are observed in South Korea, where universities have implemented EMI with strong government support (Kim et al., 2017). Ranking-based university evaluations, such as Joongang and Chosun University rankings in South Korea, have incentivized HEIs to increase their EMI course offerings to enhance international competitiveness. Although Mongolia introduced a national university ranking system in 2023, the

evaluation criteria do not require the inclusion of EMI.

The desire to catch up is also closely linked to university rankings. Several Asian countries have adopted aggressive internationalization policies as part of the global catch-up phenomenon (Yamamoto, 2018). Under internationalization policies, EMI is utilized as a tool to attract international students, improve the English-language skills of domestic students, and enable them to work internationally (Altbach, 2004).

Sideways factor—International collaborations

HEIs in South Korea collaborate with foreign institutions, and it is an additional feature of internationalization linked to EMI programs (Jeon et al., 2022). Private universities, having more extensive contacts abroad are particularly interested in EMI programs, as they enable them to attract more fee-paying international students. Studies exploring reasons behind adopting EMI (Chen et al., 2024; Lehtikainen, 2004) commonly find that participation in higher education exchange programs serves as the initial motivation. In countries where the national language(s) are less commonly taught elsewhere, bilateral exchanges are only feasible if courses are delivered in an international language, predominantly English (Coleman, 2006).

The literature documents the rationales for and objectives of international programs. For example, in Japan, the government granted permission for universities to establish international programs, including joint degree and double degree programs. As a result, the number of international students accepted under these programs increased (Sugimura & Yamaguchi, 2023). Similarly, in Indonesia, international students prefer international programs conducted in English (Logli & Wahyuni, 2023). Universities interested in EMI education, whether to attract international students, often engage in strategic partnerships with universities from predominantly Anglophone countries (Jenkins, 2011; Phillipson, 2006). In these partnerships, the institution from the Anglophone countries holds decision-making authority (Jenkins, 2011). English emerges as the predominant language of instruction in joint or double-degree programs (Gundsambuu, 2019c).

Methodology

This case study investigates the external and sideways factors influencing private institutions to adopt EMI policies in Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan, covering six private universities (coded as A and B in Mongolia, C and D in South Korea, and E and F in Japan). It addresses the following research questions:

1. For what reasons do private universities adopt EMI policies?
2. How do external and sideways factors influence private universities to implement EMI programs?

A total of 45 implementers (N=45) from EMI programs across six universities were interviewed. They were categorized into three groups based on their roles: nine senior administrators, seven junior administrators, and 29 full-time faculty members teaching in the EMI program. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and fieldwork (visiting the campus to observe EMI courses and conduct the interviews) in Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan between 2018 and 2019. Interviews were recorded for transcription using NVivo 12. Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed for data analysis, consisting of within-case and cross-case analysis.

Findings & Discussions

External factor

It was evident that an external factor influenced the decision of the case-study universities to adopt the EMI policy. Firstly, program implementers identified national and global university ranking systems as influential external factors. Information of universities in Japan and South Korea exists in popular ranking systems, such as the THEWUR and QSWUR. However, there is no information of Mongolian universities in these systems.

Secondly, the quest for world-class universities through publication and research output in English is a significant factor, particularly in Europe and Asia (Deem et al., 2008). Although University D prioritized research output in English for rankings, other universities did not emphasize its importance.

Thirdly, the findings of this study corroborate with previous research (e.g., Brown, 2017; Dewi, 2018; Gundsambuu, 2019b; Hewitt, 2021; Kim et al., 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Yonezawa, 2010). Dewi (2018) observed that Indonesia and South Korea aim to elevate their top universities globally. Kim et al. (2017) highlighted the Korean government's aggressive pursuit of introducing EMI in higher education to boost global competitiveness with financial support since 2004. The university ranking system developed by the JoongAng Ilbo, an English language news organization in South Korea, introduced the index of globalization, including ratios of EMI classes, impacting both top national and private universities.

Universities C and E, recipients of their government's incentives for offering EMI programs, are no exception to their government policy.

Domestically, rankings are a major deciding factor in private investment and public funding decisions. EMI can be viewed as an investment for universities struggling to maintain or improve their rankings. This is especially evident for the case-study universities A, B, D, and F. These universities have invested substantially in resources to establish EMI programs.

Sideways factor

In addition to the external factors, this study's findings reveal the presence of a sideways factor influencing the adoption of EMI by these case-study universities. All case-study universities except University F unanimously supported that international collaboration in a way of establishing joint/dual degree programs and exchange programs with partner universities abroad have had a greater impact on the introduction of EMI programs.

This study shows that universities A, B, C, and E have established international offices to manage EMI programs, exchange programs, and recruitment of international students. International collaboration, particularly through joint/dual degree programs and exchange programs with partner universities abroad, has significantly influenced the introduction of EMI programs. HEIs in Mongolia view English as essential for collaboration with foreign universities. Universities A and B in Mongolia have developed more joint/dual degree programs in English. This trend is also observed in the HEIs in Japan and South Korea.

This study also aligns with previous research (Costa & Coleman, 2012; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014; Gundsambuu, 2019b), which indicates that private HEIs with more international contacts are proportionately more interested in EMI programs to attract more fee-paying international students. Program implementers in universities A, B, C, D, and E highlight significant benefits from international collaborations, particularly in attracting more international students and being more visible abroad. However, none of the case study universities except University D emphasized the financial benefit of fee-paying international students and educational benefits for domestic students studying alongside international peers.

Conclusion

This study identified two key factors influencing the adoption of EMI by the case-study institutions: global university rankings and international collaborations in joint/dual degree programs in English. The study also found that the rationales for implementing EMI programs in the case study universities in Japan and Korea align with their respective government's policies on internationalization. The desire to enhance institutional competitiveness in the international higher education market and attract international students played an important role in the case study institutions' decisions to adopt the EMI policy. Moreover, this study discovered that the case study universities in Korea are desperate for competition for status that drives demand for rankings. However, this study revealed that no specific policy is dedicated to private HEIs in Mongolia, and the rationales for introducing EMI programs are driven by the institutions' own initiatives and motivations. The study's findings are limited by the small number of participants, restricting the generalization of the results to a broader population. Future studies should include a larger sample size, particularly incorporating the director or head of the school running the program.

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