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Factors influencing the implementation of English medium instruction programs in East Asian higher education: A comparative case study

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Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing higher education institutions in Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan to adopt English medium instruction policies. It also examines the roles of program implementers in the decision-making process. Through thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 45 program implementers from six universities, two factors emerged: global university rankings and international collaborations with partner foreign universities. The study also found that faculty members are marginally involved in decision-making processes regarding the implementation of English medium instruction programs.

Introduction

English medium instruction (EMI) is spreading rapidly throughout the non-Anglophone academic world. Madhavan (2014) defines EMI as teaching academic subjects without explicit language learning aims in a country where English is not spoken by a majority of the people. With a growing number of mobile students, faculty, and researchers, English is used as an international language of communication, essential for higher education institutions (HEIs) to remain globally competitive (Dearden, 2015).

Due to the Bologna Process in Europe, students started enrolling in EMI courses at universities abroad. EMI is viewed as an effective way to attract international students and promote internationalizing at home (Bowles & Murthy, 2020). Other non-Anglophone Asian countries, such as China, Indonesia, and Japan, have adopted this trend to attract international students by expanding EMI policies (Gundsambuu, 2019a). EMI is a key strategic goal across various academic fields in many Asian countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Galloway, 2020). Private universities use EMI to enhance global competitiveness and elevate their positions in international rankings (Gundsambuu, 2019b).

Few studies have examined the potential impacts of global university rankings as an external factor and international collaboration as a sideways factor on the EMI policies of private HEIs. This study explores the influence of global university rankings and international collaboration on the decision-making process to adopt EMI policies in private HEIs. It focuses on the roles of EMI program implementers in the decision-making process of private HEIs in Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan. The study argues that private HEIs in these East Asian countries use EMI as a strategy for survival, seeking national and international recognition prompted by global and national university rankings and establishing joint and dual degree programs with foreign partners.

Conceptual Framework

This study explores the potential drivers behind adopting EMI, considering external and sideways factors and the influence of top-down or bottom-up initiatives on the decision-making process regarding EMI programs. This study uses four key practical constructs from existing literature and relevant theories to guide this study. These constructs include Knight and de Wit's rationales for internationalization (1997; Knight, 2004), the impact of rankings on the strategic and operational decision-making of HEIs (Hazelkorn, 2008, 2009), the establishment of international collaboration (Rinehart et al., 2017) and the decision-making process (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). The study formulates the data collection and analysis by incorporating these constructs into its conceptual framework.

Literature Review

Rationales for EMIAs Walkinshaw et al. (2017) summarize, the Asia Pacific region is rushing into EMI policy in higher education for several reasons: 1) the role of English as the main language for trade, commerce, diplomacy, and scholarship; 2) the growth of higher education sector in the Asia Pacific region; and 3) policy initiatives undertaken by governments in the Asia Pacific region in relation to the

international profile. EMI is closely tied to the IoHE, aiding in attracting international students and faculty, thereby raising institutional international and research standings. Climbing up national and international rankings can help with publicity and attract students and staff. Furthermore, as noted by Hultgren et al. (2015), drivers of EMI can be conceptualized at different levels, ranging from the global to the classroom.

At the global level, the General Agreement on Trade in Services has influenced member states to consider higher education a tradeable service. Consequently, higher education is perceived as a commodity, and university ranking systems play an increasingly pivotal role in universities competing for students. Therefore, HEIs have sought to expand their EMI programs.

At the national level, governments play a significant role in shaping policies that contribute to implementing EMI program (Hultgren et al., 2015). For instance, in Denmark, government policies prioritize internationalization efforts, which institutions translate into increasing the number of international staff. Similarly, certain developing countries aim to boost the number of inbound students through targeted policies. The implementation of EMI at the institutional level is largely contingent on national policies.

At the institutional level, HEIs consider EMI as a means to equip their domestic students with skills necessary for success in a global job market. Institutions make policy decisions regarding EMI, such as augmenting the recruitment of international staff. Wächter and Maiworm (2014) found that the most commonly cited reasons for implementing EMI include enhancing the international profile and visibility of institutions and fostering stronger collaborations with foreign partner universities and institutions.

At the departmental level, decisions regarding EMI may deviate from those made by the institution. As Airey (2014) argues, the implementation of EMI varies across academic disciplines or departments. In other words, departments ranging from natural sciences to humanities may challenge university-wide language policies. They may decide their language usage, potentially incorporating a parallel use of English and local languages. At the classroom level, English serves as a lingua franca where none of the students have the local or national language as their first language (Hultgren et al., 2015).

External factor

From the perspective of East Asian governments, university rankings exert significant pressure on higher education policies (Deem et al., 2008). This pressure can result in direct government mandates imposed on HEIs. Consequently, East Asian HEIs have embarked on institutional-level transformations, including the development of EMI programs and pressing for changes to the traditional roles of professors (Ghazarian, 2011). In Japan, initiatives driven by rankings include offering financial incentives to professors for research and focusing on internationalizing higher education through increased enrollment of international students and expansion of EMI programs (Hazelkorn, 2009). Similar initiatives are observed in South Korea.

Over the past decade, Korean universities have adopted EMI with significant support from the government and media (Kim et al., 2017). In Korea, rankings, such as the Joongang and Chosun

Korean HEIs increased their offerings of EMI courses in response.

For countries already competing for access to global markets, rankings play a crucial role in introducing competition into the realm of academic human resources (Ghazarian, 2011). Within the higher education market, rankings provide a significant incentive for attracting top-tier students and researchers, thereby contributing to the enhancement of a country's higher education system (Gaul, 2005).

Universities are no longer solely competing within their own national borders; they now find themselves on a global stage alongside other universities worldwide. This has prompted many institutions to embrace EMI to market themselves and enhance their appeal to an international audience (Kang, 2018).

There is compelling evidence indicating that HEIs function as strategic enterprises, leveraging rankings to define targets and establish strategic objectives. As Hazelcorn (2009) notes, there is growing evidence suggesting rankings are shaping institutional priorities, including implementing EMI programs to attract international students.

Sideways factor

Costa & Coleman (2012) highlighted that private HEIs in Italy often collaborate with foreign institutions, an additional aspect of internationalization commonly associated with EMI programs. Private universities tend to have more extensive connections abroad and are particularly interested in EMI programs, as they enable them to attract a greater number of fee-paying international students. However, according to studies examining the reasons behind the adoption of EMI (Ammon & McConnell, 2002; Hellekjaer & Westergaard, 2003; Lehikoinen, 2004), the initial motivation often stems from participation in higher education exchange programs. In countries where the national language(s) are not widely taught elsewhere, bilateral exchanges are only feasible if courses are delivered in an international language, most commonly English (Coleman, 2006).

The literature documents the rationales for and objectives of international programs. For instance, in Germany and Austria, one rationale includes the perceived need to increase the number of international students (Alexander, 2008). Germany and its HEIs are striving to enhance their popularity and visibility abroad. Ammon and McConnell (2002) observed that international programs have successfully attracted new international students who may not have otherwise chosen to study in Germany.

Universities interested in EMI education, whether to attract international students or to equip their local students for the global economy, are often engaged in strategic partnerships with universities predominantly located in Anglophone countries (Jenkins, 2011; Phillipson, 2006). English emerges as the predominant language of instruction in joint or double-degree programs (Gundsambuu, 2019c).

EMI policy, with existing documents being inconsistent and even contradictory (Kirkpatrick, 2017a). Similarly, in three European countries studied, most teachers were uncertain about their university's EMI policy, and there was a lack of clarity regarding which subjects should be taught in English (Dearden & Macaro, 2016).

In Myanmar, government policy forces all HEIs to implement EMI. However, the level of English proficiency among staff and students is insufficient to deliver content in English (Kirkpatrick, 2017a). Likewise, Newbold (2017) found that adopting EMI in Italian universities has been driven by top-down directives from governing bodies as part of an overarching internationalization strategy. A similar result is also found in the research by Airey et al. (2015), which found that governments in Nordic countries have actively promoted the use of English in higher education settings.

Adopting EMI in HEIs across Asia is often perceived as a top-down process. Vietnamese policymakers, for example, have embraced the IoHE policy and seek to implement EMI courses in all HEIs (Manh, 2012). However, the author argues that the English proficiency levels of both instructors and students are inadequate for effective implementation.

The decision-making process concerning English language policy occurs through both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches. Malaysia proves an example of a 'top-down' policy for adopting EMI. The Malaysian government initiated this change to address concerns about the weakening English competencies among its population, which had hindered their access to knowledge in fields such as science and technology (Gill, 2006).

Another top-down policy example is Japan. Governmental policies and incentives regarding higher education and its reforms are a top-down force behind the IoHE in Japan (Stigger, 2018). In Japan, the top-down policy and management system are traditionally exercised in higher education.

In contrast to the top-down approach to EMI policy implementation at a broader level, little is known about whether there are bottom-up initiatives in the EMI setting. Nonetheless, a few examples of bottom-up initiatives have been documented in implementing EMI programs at universities. For instance, teachers at the Complutense University of Madrid began offering specific modules through EMI in 2005 (Dafouz et al., 2014). This grassroots initiative eventually evolved into a more systematic and institutionalized plan in 2009, establishing an EMI degree program.

Methodology

This qualitative case study explores EMI policies and practices at six private universities, two from each country. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What influences the decision of private higher education institutions to adopt EMI policy?
2. How are the implementers involved in the decision-making process regarding EMI?

University E (Japan), and one graduate in University F (Japan).

A total of 45 implementers (N=45) from these EMI programs across six universities participated in this study. 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 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

This study revealed that an external factor influenced the decision of the HEIs of the study to adopt the EMI policy. Program implementers strongly referred to national and global university ranking systems as the external factor. According to Deem et al. (2008), HEIs in Europe and Asia have been undergoing substantial restructuring efforts to enhance their competitiveness and hierarchical positioning domestically and globally. This has intensified competition among HEIs to demonstrate their performance through global university rankings (Marginson, 2006). In Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Singapore, and Malaysia, governments and universities have significantly emphasized university ranking exercises (Deem et al., 2008). Furthermore, government policies in these countries have primarily focused on national universities.

Popular ranking systems, such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings, feature rankings for Japanese and South Korean universities. However, these rankings do not include information on Mongolian universities. The study shows that universities A and B in Mongolia, D in South Korea, and E and F in Japan aim to excel domestically before targeting Asian rankings. Conversely, University C in South Korea, already prominent domestically, seeks global recognition.

Deem et al. (2008) suggest that universities in Europe and Asia strive for world-class status based on their publication and research output in English. Interestingly, except for University D, none of the universities in the study emphasized the significance of English research output for rankings.

The study's findings are also evident in previous studies (e.g., Brown, 2017; Dewi, 2018; Gundsambuu, 2019b; Hewitt, 2021; Kim et al., 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2011). For instance, Dewi (2018) compared the higher education systems and IoHE in Indonesia and South Korea, revealing that both countries aim to elevate their top universities to global status. Kim et al. (2017) highlighted the Korean government’s aggressive pursuit of introducing EMI in higher education to boost global competitiveness. Since 2004, South Korea’s Ministry of Education has financially supported universities implementing EMI policies. Furthermore, the ranking system by the JoongAng Ilbo in South Korea introduced the index of globalization, which included ratios of EMI classes. University C, a recipient of the government incentives for offering EMI programs, is no exception to this government policy.

Domestically, rankings are a major deciding factor in private investment and public funding decisions. EMI initiatives can be considered investments for universities striving to uphold or enhance

Sideways factor

The study unveiled a sideways factor contributing to the adoption of EMI by the case-study institutions. HEIs are increasingly involved in international collaborations as part of their internationalization efforts. Universities make their strategic plan to attain international acknowledgment and recognition. To achieve this, HEIs are now rushing to establish joint and dual degree programs with foreign universities and programs tailored for international students (Dewi, 2018).

The study indicates that universities A, B, C, and E have established international offices tasked with managing EMI programs, exchange programs, and the recruitment of international students. However, all case-study universities, except University F, unanimously agree that international collaboration, particularly through the establishment of joint and dual degree programs and exchange programs with partner universities abroad, has had a significant impact on the introduction of EMI programs. HEIs in Mongolia consider English the primary means of collaboration with foreign universities. Universities A and B in Mongolia have developed more joint and dual degree programs in English. Similar trends are observed in the case study HEIs in Japan and South Korea.

This study aligns with previous studies (Costa & Coleman, 2012; Ẅachter & Maiworm, 2014; Gundsambuu, 2019b), reporting that private HEIs are keenly interested in EMI programs due to their extensive international contacts. These programs enable them to attract more fee-paying international students and enrich learning through collaboration with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. For instance, Alexander (2008) noted that German HEIs introduced EMI programs to increase their international student population and enhance visibility abroad. Similarly, program implementers at universities A, B, C, D, and E acknowledged the benefits of international collaborations, particularly through joint and dual degree and exchange programs in English, in attracting more international students (notably universities B, D, and E). Interestingly, none of the case study universities except University D mentioned the financial gains from fee-paying international students. Moreover, none of the case-study universities cited the benefit of domestic students studying alongside international peers.

While all case-study universities emphasize joint and dual degree programs in English, universities B, C, and E prioritize exchange programs to attract more international students to their EMI programs. The study's findings also affirm the presence of joint and dual degree and exchange programs in English significantly contributes to the enrollment of international students in EMI programs.

Program implementers' role in decision-making

Universities A, B, C, and E established EMI programs through top-down decisions by their respective institutions' top management. University B stands out for being a 100% EMI institution in Mongolia, driven by the former president's vision to elevate Mongolian higher education to international standards. Unlike others, all program implementers at University B were recruited after the establishment of EMI programs. Meanwhile, universities A, C, and E based their EMI programs on existing medium of instruction programs or initiated new programs. The decision for universities C in South Korea and E in Japan was influenced by government internationalization policies, which provided financial incentives for opening EMI programs. These programs were built upon existing Korean and Japanese medium of instruction programs. University A introduced the EMI program as a new initiative by institutional

Botha (2013) similarly asserts that EMI adoption often results from decisions by university administrators and policymakers rather than grassroots stakeholders. These studies collectively suggest a prevalent top-down approach. Governing bodies of universities mandate EMI adoption as part of internationalization efforts. Additionally, some studies highlighted faculty members' uncertainty regarding EMI policies, alongside policymakers and university managers' focus on economic growth, prestige, and internationalization (Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2017a).

Bottom-up initiatives for EMI programs were observed in universities D in South Korea and F in Japan. A faculty member initiated the EMI program at University D in South Korea. Similarly, a faculty member's idea at University E in Japan led to the development of an EMI program. Program implementers were hired after the establishment of these programs.

The study reveals the limited involvement of program implementers in EMI decision-making processes. While program implementers participate in faculty meetings where minor issues regarding EMI implementation are discussed, language barriers often hinder international faculty members from actively contributing. In universities where faculty meetings are conducted in the native language, international faculty members face challenges voicing their opinions. This is observed in universities E and F in Japan, where meetings are held in Japanese, and universities C in Korea, in Korean. Conversely, universities A and B in Mongolia and D in South Korea conduct meetings in English, eliminating language barriers.

Program implementers express concerns about the lack of transparency in decision-making processes regarding EMI implementation. This aligns with Molino & Campagna's (2014) findings, indicating that program implementers feel insufficiently involved in decision-making. Similar sentiments are echoed in Dearden & Macaro's (2016) study, where key actors in EMI implementation claim they are rarely consulted by university policymakers and managers.

Conclusion

The study identifies two key factors driving EMI adoption in the case-study institutions: global university rankings and international collaborations in joint and dual degree programs in English. In Japan and South Korea, government policies on internationalization align with the institutions' desires to enhance competitiveness and attract international students. However, in Mongolia, EMI adoption appears driven more by institutional initiatives than specific government policies.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the limited involvement of program implementers, particularly faculty members, in EMI decision-making processes. Despite their crucial role in EMI implementation, their voices are often marginalized, potentially posing challenges to prgram quality.

These findings underscore the need for greater inclusivity and transparency in EMI policy-making, particularly regarding faculty members' input. Addressing these issues could improve the effectiveness and quality of EMI programs in HEIs across the studied countries.

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