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On the Urgent Need to Protect Accreditation from Political Intervention

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EDITORIAL

On the Urgent Need to Protect Accreditation from Political Intervention

Gerardo L. Blanco

As authoritarian regimes come to the realization that interfering directly in university governance can result in societal pushback, indirect mechanisms (such as the use of assessment reforms and budgetary austerity) serve as safer and longer-lasting approaches to weaken and silence the higher education sector, a key component of civil society and a potential source of resistance. Accreditation plays a significant role as an educational policy steering mechanism, and, in contexts like the US, where governments have made their contempt for the higher education system explicit, actions to reform accreditation are already in motion.

In the US, the Trump administration has issued an executive order directing accreditors to scrutinize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, which this administration has characterized as unlawful; to recognize new accrediting bodies; and to make it easier for institutions to change accreditors. These proposed reforms for accreditation are in line with recommendations made by the conservative Heritage Foundation and its Plan 2025. A coalition of some of the most Trump-aligned states (e.g., Florida) has formed a Commission for Public Higher Education, which is effectively a new institutional accreditor that promises "transparency and efficiency"—despite the fact that existing US accreditors have in place some of the most transparent of recognition processes. There is also great concern that the second promise, efficiency, should not come at the expense of fitness for purpose, which has long been recognized as the central feature of quality assurance. The American Association of University Professors has already expressed opposition to this new accreditor based on concerns about the ability of a politically motivated initiative to uphold academic freedom.

These developments carry significant implications for higher education around the world. Accreditation in the US is revered throughout the world for its autonomy from governmental intervention. Throughout history, that independence has served the public interest. What is remarkable about the creation of a new accreditor in the US is that political interference is being presented under the veneer of "public higher education." This is an astute and disingenuous strategy, as independent accreditors have protected the public good in the US system since as early as 1885 and nearly 80 years before the first Higher Education Act was introduced in the US Congress. Recent developments will certainly tarnish the international reputation of the US system of accreditation and may also lead to less transparent and independent forms of quality assurance elsewhere in the world. In a more direct sense, these changes also have very real consequences for institutions elsewhere, given that American accreditation agencies recognize programs and institutions in more than 80 countries.

Although perhaps the most globally significant, the accreditation reforms in the US are not alone in the global higher education landscape. Indeed, they join a long list of eroding democracies that have come under authoritarian control—notably exemplified by Argentina, Türkiye and, until recently, Hungary—that have sought to weaken and discredit higher education to exert ideological control and see eliminating independent quality assurance as a key goal. These and other distressed democracies now face conditions all too common in authoritarian settings, where there is no public expectation of university autonomy and where universities have set up centers to spread their political leader's ideas, as is the case in China.

Ideological and political intervention in accreditation matters highlight the dire lack of international alternatives when the domestic accreditation landscape turns unfavorable. In some countries, like Ecuador, the quality assurance framework recognizes accreditations granted by agencies from other countries under specific circumstances. However, this generally does not amount to international accreditation but is instead the recognition of a national accreditation from another country. Some programmatic accreditations, like in engineering and business, are indeed international, but they do not apply to entire institutions. Examples of true international accreditation are still too difficult to find, even within harmonized regions like the European Higher Education Area and MERCOSUR, involving Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

Regional and international accreditation for institutions would not only respond to the more globally integrated contemporary higher education system and serve the growing internationally mobile student population; it would also be significantly less likely to be swayed by political control in a world that is increasingly politically polarized, fueled by social media algorithms and AI-fueled disinformation. Evidently, the creation of regional and international accreditation systems is daunting. A parallel exercise, the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, has gained 41 signatories in seven years, illustrating the challenges of deep global cooperation and trust-building. Yet resisting illegitimate government intervention in higher education matters nation by nation, as the US example illustrates, might be equally or perhaps even more daunting. Unfortunately, government overreach in higher education is no longer a far-fetched possibility but is today's reality in an increasing number of countries.

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International Collaboration: Expansion, Regression, and Diversification

Damtew Teferra

Academia thrives on openness, intellectual exchange, cross-border mobility, and collaboration. Yet considerable challenges increasingly confound the long-established culture and praxis. Student mobility and academic exchanges, in particular, have become constrained by visa restrictions and delays, discriminatory border practices, and limited post-study opportunities, intensifying collaboration asymmetries while shifting and reshaping the established center–periphery paradigm. The Global Compact in Research Collaboration offers a solution for pursuing more equitable, sustainable, and meaningful academic and research partnership for global development.

The academic community thrives in environments that encourage openness, intellectual exchange, and cross-border mobility and collaboration. Scientific breakthroughs and progress have often depended on collaboration and networks that transcend national boundaries, bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise to address shared challenges and enhance opportunities.

It has been well established that problems such as climate, migration, energy, the environment, and health are intricately interconnected and transnational in nature. Thus, they demand collaborative approaches that integrate multiple forms of expertise, diverse methodological perspectives, and context-sensitive knowledge systems.

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar world, a new era of collaborative spirit appeared to have dawned with enthusiasm for global cooperation. For decades, this global regime espoused a set of principles that, while never perfectly realized, provided a framework for relative stability and cooperation. Within this framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were developed as a set of guiding principles that would unify the world around a set of shared development aspirations, cast in 17 goals and 169 targets. At the time of their development in 2015, it was assumed that the SDGs would not only underpin political and economic relations but also enable an expansion of global academic exchange, scientific collaboration, and knowledge production across borders. However, this is now in doubt, as considerable challenges increasingly confound the assumed culture and praxis.

Restrictions to Mobility

Student mobility and academic exchanges fuel international collaboration. According to UNESCO, of the total global higher education enrollment of about 269 million students, some 7.3 million study outside their home country, with most studying in the UK (26 percent), the US (21 percent), Australia (13 percent) and Europe. But considerable shifts in enrollment trends are now evident in most of these historically major host countries.

Visa restrictions, prolonged processing times, discriminatory border practices, and limitations on post-study opportunities have intensified barriers to academic mobility. For academics, obtaining research visas, conference permits, visiting scholar appointments, and work authorizations has become more difficult, uncertain, bureaucratically burdensome, and expensive. Such developments disproportionately affect students and academics from the Global South, many of whom already face financial, institutional, and geopolitical disadvantages.

International research collaboration depends heavily on mobility, trust, and sustained intellectual exchange. Yet these restrictions carry profound implications for global knowledge production and engender epistemic inequality. When Southern scholars face obstacles, this exclusion not only marginalizes individual researchers but also weakens the diversity and richness of global scholarship. Universities benefit immensely from the intellectual contributions, international networks, and research outputs generated through collaboration with Southern scholars, yet these institutions often remain insufficiently vocal in challenging policies that undermine these very partnerships.

Limited Collaboration

The consequences of mobility extend far beyond individual careers, professional advancement, or personal academic trajectories. Academic and scholarly mobility is not merely an issue of moving researchers, students, and knowledge workers across borders; rather, it constitutes a central mechanism through which institutions, societies, and nations build intellectual capital, advance innovation, and intensify their

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capacity to respond to increasingly complex global realities. Barriers to mobility generate implications that are systemic rather than merely personal.

These restrictions threaten humanity's collective ability to confront challenges that are inherently global in scope and cannot be adequately addressed within isolated national boundaries. The challenge is not one of mere representation or fairness, although these remain important concerns; it is also a matter of intellectual prowess and global problem-solving competence. The exclusion of Southern scholars narrows the range of perspectives, experiences, practices, and knowledge informing research and policy discussions. Excluding these academics also risks reproducing forms of epistemic dominance in which particular regions continue to define priorities, methodologies, and interpretations for the rest of the world. Knowledge production then becomes less diverse, less inclusive, and ultimately less capable of addressing complex realities.

Reduced Development Partnerships

Research partnerships have been supported and mediated through funding from development partners. The changing geopolitical dynamic is such that these are diminishing significantly. Governments are placing greater emphasis on safeguarding sensitive knowledge and protecting critical technologies, sometimes leading to restrictions on collaboration or increased scrutiny of international partnerships.

Development assistance, research funding, international scholarships, and collaborative grants are facing mounting pressure as governments redirect resources toward domestic economic recovery, security concerns, border control, and strategic geopolitical interests. Good examples are Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, which have supported a multitude of development cooperation in the past but are now cutting back—and heavily.

In 2022, only 1 percent of bilateral aid from DAC countries went to R&D and only 0.2 percent to research institutions. This comes after the official development assistance for R&D fell from US$2.7 billion in 2018 to US$1.7 billion in 2022—a 40 percent decline.

Shifting Center–Periphery Dynamics

These trends are deeply misguided. The emergence of increasingly multipolar centers of knowledge in recent decades suggests that the traditional linear center–periphery model has become progressively inadequate for explaining contemporary global realities, with new centers emerging and relationships shifting. The future of global scholarship and innovation is likely to be shaped not by a single dominant center but by a diverse constellation of actors whose contributions, perspectives, and capabilities have become paramount.

While historical asymmetries remain significant, the assumption that the Global South can be indefinitely sidelined or rendered dependent is therefore becoming increasingly untenable. If the underlying intent of recent actions is to further marginalize, isolate, and subordinate institutions and actors from the Global South, those pursuing this course may be in for a rude awakening. Countries and institutions that were once viewed primarily as recipients or consumers of knowledge are increasingly becoming important producers, innovators, and agenda setters in their own right.

This transformation has been accelerated by expanding higher education systems, technological advancements, digital connectivity, increased research investments, South–South cooperation, and the growing international visibility of institutions outside traditional Global North academic centers. So, the very prohibitive policies and practices that perpetuate the extant paradigm and sustain the predominance of the Global North—whether deliberately or unintentionally—probably will not serve the long-term interest; indeed, they undermine it. A more malleable and pragmatic approach seems prudent in response to the changing reality, as more realignment, fragmentation, and "rupture" loom large and the Global South becomes another key, competitive, and competing hub.

A Global Compact

For institutions and researchers in the Global South, these developments present both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, fragmentation in the global order may limit access to traditional networks and funding sources. On the other, the emergence of new power centers and alternative partnership frameworks could open pathways for more diversified and equitable forms of collaboration. South–South and South–South–North partnerships, for instance, may gain renewed relevance as scholars and institutions seek to build networks that are resilient in the face of geopolitical uncertainty and global rupture. The recent announcement of Brazil to provide 2,600 scholarships to African postgraduate students with an aim to strengthen academic exchange, research collaboration, and scientific cooperation is one case in point.

The Global Compact in Research Collaboration, that was unveiled in April 2026 at an international conference in Ethiopia, offers the best way forward, as it represents an equitable, fair—and meaningful—partnership framework alternative that can supplant the transactional and extractive practices rampant in the world of academic and research collaborations today.

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Have We Given Enough Consideration to the Universal Phase?

Ellen Hazelkorn

Once participation of upward of 80+ percent of populations in some form of advanced learning is viewed as obligatory, a revolution in the modes of provision becomes necessary. But our postsecondary/tertiary education systems have changed very little; all eyes remain on university. Have we given sufficient strategic consideration to the shape, role, and constituent parts of the tertiary system in the universal phase?

The massification of postsecondary/tertiary education has been a tremendous success. In the 1970s, only 10 percent of the world's school leavers were enrolled and the general enrollment ratio (GER) exceeded 15 percent in only 19 countries, led by the US at 47.0 percent. By 2023, 79 percent of European and North American school leavers were enrolled in tertiary education along with over 60 percent in Oceania and eastern/southeastern Asia; only sub-Saharan Africa, at 9 percent, lagged significantly behind. As the learner population has increased, so has its diversity by age, background, and circumstances.

But faultlines are visible everywhere. Geopolitical/geoeconomic transformations, demographic shifts, climate change, and the technological/AI revolution are dramatically changing the world of work with significant implications for individuals and society. Are our current educational systems a match for the challenges of uneven economic growth; sluggish innovation; skill shortages; perceived divergence between qualifications, skills, and employment; deepening social and regional inequalities; and concerns around value for money? Have we put too much emphasis on the omnipresent university model and failed to consider alternatives? What lessons should we learn from populism's response to people feeling frustrated and left behind?

How these challenges are playing out varies considerably—but there are lessons for everyone. As people in Ireland say, "It may not be your problem today, but it may be someday."

Faultlines

If the earlier phase of massification was shaped by the shift to the knowledge economy and the need for high-value knowledge workers buttressed by personal ambition and social positioning, the transition to the universal age is being shaped by the successes and disappointments of those earlier aspirations. As more people graduate, the link between a university qualification and higher earnings weakens, and concerns rise about "elite overproduction" and return on investment. The International Labour Organization argues that economic growth is unlikely to be sufficient to "provide enough productive, quality jobs for the large and growing populations of young people entering the labour market."

On the basis that what is repeatable is replaceable, AI's impact is already beginning to affect graduate entry jobs in coveted "white-collar" law, finance, accounting, consulting, etc. In contrast, many forms of employment (e.g., technical, teaching, caring, counseling, nursing, and the traditional trades/crafts) often perceived as lower-status are likely to be key to the future success of societies and economies.

Demographic shifts are upending enrollment expectations. On the notion of "build them and they will come," institutions previously needed to do relatively little to recruit learners. Government support is becoming unreliable due to its own revenue challenges and competitive demands from elsewhere within society/economies, together with learners' and public unwillingness to cover the costs. The private sector is growing worldwide even in countries with no/relatively low public tuition costs. While mergers and closures are being considered across many countries, neither these changes nor the rush to establish transnational education outposts are likely to resolve growing tensions and structural problems.

As the sector has expanded, it has paradoxically become more vertically stratified and unequal with average skills levels not increasing, and the share of people not in employment, education or training (NEET) exceeding 15% in several OECD countries. Status and educational credentialism, policy, and regulation have positioned research universities at the top of the educational ladder. Hidden from view has been the contributory role played by rankings in reproducing social and economic elites, increasing state subsidies and benefits to privileged institutions usually located in large urban centers and the people who study at them, thus amplifying regional disparities and social tensions.

The intersection of technology, demography, inequalities, finance, and competition has exposed a tsunami of faultlines. Yet

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higher education institutions and the academic community have largely been tone-deaf to questions about curriculum relevance, learner outcomes, skill gaps, underemployment, labor mismatch, and so on. Ironically, as consecutive surveys have shown high percentages of people expressing disappointment, demands to widen participation through the *current* institutional forms have grown. Whether causation, correlation, or coincidence, aspirant frustrations around employment and housing opportunities, broken faith in meritocracy, regional disparities, and loss of trust across policy spheres are rising, feeding into cultural and economic discontent and other grievances.

The Universal Phase Is Tertiary

Once postsecondary education becomes obligatory for the overwhelming majority of the population, there will be a necessary revolution in the modes of provision. While the expansion of the number of institutions helped resolve earlier challenges of learner ambition and labor market demand, "more of the same" is no longer a solution.

Heretofore, all eyes have been on (research) universities and "going to uni" as the prime ambition. The California system has been hailed as a system solution to diversity, but in reality, it created three distinct tiers based on the division of labor, talent, and knowledge production. Other countries, such as Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, have a strict binary division between research-intensive universities and universities of applied sciences, atop a secondary system with vocational and academic pathways. In both arrangements, diversity is a hierarchy stretching from research (elite) universities at one end to teaching (mass) and vocational at the other. Research intensity, rather than educational provision, has been the key differentiator and reputational symbol as well as a determinant of funding.

Notably, technical and vocational education and training/community colleges, polytechnics, higher technical education, etc. are principally seen as alternative access routes to higher education or providers "of last resort." Pejorative terms such as "non-universities" are used to describe a wide range of institutions while "academic" universities are viewed as the only path to "real" success.

Ireland is a case study. Over 95 percent of students complete secondary school, with almost 70 percent of learners transitioning directly to university and 22.2 percent to further education and training (FET). Since adopting an economic model based on foreign direct investment in 1958, the big story has been massification. Quite simply, the aim has been to get more people well-educated. Today Ireland has a multicultural economically dynamic economy, one of the richest in the world.

However, as the higher education system has expanded and evolved, FET has declined or stagnated. There are significant skill shortages in key areas and evidence that ~30 percent of graduates do not require their level of qualifications for their current roles. AI is estimated to affect upwards of 7% of employment in primarily "white collar" jobs. Emigration is on the rise again. Frustrated ambitions combined with a shortage of housing, high rents, poor infrastructure, and rising costs of living threaten the social contract.

Countries are realizing that participation of upward of 80+ percent of populations in some form of advanced learning—vocational, technical, academic—requires a more dramatic transformation of the system as a whole. In May 2022, the Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science launched a "policy vision for a more unified tertiary education and research system…." The first phase of the policy vision, *Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge – policy platform*, set out some steps; however, brownfield transformation is slow.

While developed countries experience a *demographic deficit* and developing countries a *demographic dividend*, both share similar challenges. As demand continues to rise, countries face a proliferation of institutions (public and private) being outpaced by, *inter alia*, social and economic change, technology/AI, labor market dynamics, available resources and infrastructure, regulatory capacity, and geopolitical tensions. In our rush to build successful knowledge economies, we need to learn lessons from what has and has not worked and engage in strategic foresight around the shape, role, and constituent parts of a diversified tertiary system for the universal phase.

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This paper draws on a forthcoming chapter, "Congestion and Contestation in the Universal Phase: Trends and Faultlines Across the Tertiary Landscape," in Handbook on Competition in Higher Education, edited by Pedro N. Teixeira & Barbara Sporn.

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Classifying University and College Closures from Around the World

Ryan M. Allen

University and college closures have become an increasingly prevalent issue across the world. Yet much of the understanding on this topic has often been siloed into domestic studies rather than taking on global considerations. This article offers a categorization of institutional closures across the world using four typologies: system contraction, mergers, political pressures, and conflict and war. These classifications provide a globally unified lens on this growing trend in higher education retrenchment.

In a recent issue of *International Higher Education*, Mathews and Altbach challenged the field to take university closures seriously. Despite being a global trend, research remains siloed in domestic studies, and a unified global typology is lacking. This article furthers the call to attention by offering a classification of institutional closures that can be identified across the world: system contraction, mergers, political pressures, and conflict and war. These distinctions can offer a unified understanding and a springboard for stakeholders grappling with this growing trend.

System Contraction

Much of the college closure discourse centers on higher education contraction. This signifies a new global trend in the sector, punctuating the post-war-era massification of higher education. During this previous era, systems around the world expanded access, institutions, programs, and resources to colleges and universities. Questions have long lingered about credentialism and overeducated populations, yet the sector continued to grow across the world. Now, those trends are finally coming to an end in many contexts.

Countries have already been grappling with the demographic cliff through birthrate slowdowns. Birthrates in the East Asian region (Japan, South Korea, and China) have gained the most attention for their detrimental effects on rapidly aging populations. The impact on higher education has also been significant. Taiwan has seen 15 institutions closed recently; Japan expects over 250 private universities to close in the coming years; and Korea is looking to shutter over 80 so-called "zombie universities," which have too few students. But issues extend beyond East Asia, as birthrates are slowing globally. Our World in Data shows this trend extends even to developing nations, while the OECD has also reported a slowdown in tertiary education growth globally since COVID-19. International recruitment cannot fully bridge the gap caused by declining birthrates, leading to inevitable sector-wide closures.

The US has seen the most system-contraction closures, with roughly one institution shuttered per week, especially in economically stagnant regions and exacerbated by COVID-19. Overexpansion, online education, and for-profit actors have played roles in the sector's contraction. The appetite for public investment in higher education has weakened in recent decades, meaning that even state schools have had to fight over student pools. These conditions have led to a wide range of closures.

Mergers

Mergers (i.e., two or more universities, colleges, or departments becoming one institution) have been discussed extensively in higher education research. Although the merging of institutions does not always result in closing a college, mergers can result in the closing of a campus/location. Further, even if a specific location remains open, the mission, focus, and culture are all immensely altered through mergers. Under such conditions, the more dominant partners are more likely to retain their ethos while the weaker lose. These lopsided power dynamics can make mergers more of an acquisition rather than a marriage. Brazil's private higher education sector has been especially aggressive toward these types of mergers, with hundreds of such acquisitions in recent years.

Mergers have also become a tactic that countries around the world have used to bolster prestige and world-class status, known as diversification or conglomerate mergers. Strong national institutions or departments are merged into one larger university. The 1990s in China were called the Merger Wave, with hundreds of institutions merging, including Zhejiang University, which became a top institution globally. Likewise, in Denmark, 25 institutions were turned into just eight in 2027, while South Africa saw 36 post-apartheid institutions reorganized into 23. Another version is called integration or horizontal mergers. This version sees weaker institutions joining forces—sometimes related to geographic proximity or missions, such as two Catholic institutions—to create a stronger singular university.

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Political Pressures

Political pressures that result in closing a higher education institution sit on a broad spectrum. A common variant of political pressure comes from international branch campuses. Western discontent with international branch campuses often stems from misaligned values between democracies and authoritarian hosts regarding academic freedom and free speech. These pressures have led to closures, such as Yale–NUS College in Singapore, University of Michigan-Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Texas A&M University at Qatar. The Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) estimates a roughly 15 percent failure rate for branch campuses.

Political pressures can also emanate from domestic politics in broader society, leading to closures of educational institutions. These pressures are characterized by authoritarian governments or leaders cracking down on perceived dissent from educators, intellectuals, and students. A high-profile example comes from Hungary, where Viktor Orbán pressured Central European University into closing its campus, forcing it to move to Austria. Similarly, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan shuttered 15 private institutions in Türkiye, Daniel Ortega did the same to 37 in Nicaragua, and the Taliban disbanded all women's institutions or programs in Afghanistan. More benign domestic pressures, such as "town versus gown" tensions or environmental litigation, can also force relocations. Collectively, these political pressures range from local disputes to state-sanctioned shutdowns.

Conflict and War

During times of conflict or crisis, higher education institutions must grapple with chaos, destruction, and sometimes death around and within their communities. Depending on the length and intensity of the conflicts, campuses may shutter, and operations may be moved to a safer area or to an entirely new country. UNESCO reported that conflicts (such as those in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Ukraine) have led to hundreds of thousands of students fleeing their home countries, with some institutions choosing to continue from abroad as universities in exile. Three presidents of Palestinian universities released a statement declaring that their missions will continue, even if the old campuses lay in rubble. Most, if not all, of the universities in the country have lost much of their campus infrastructure.

China's history is emblematic; during the Japanese occupation and subsequent Communist takeover, hundreds of institutions moved or closed permanently. Some moved their namesake to Taiwan (such as National *Tsing Hua* University), while others merged into Mainland state institutions (such as *Tsinghua* University). Both versions of *Tsinghua* claim the early history before the split.

Campuses that close due to conflict may eventually reopen in different forms. Long after a conflict ends or comes to a resolution, sectors may attempt to reclaim the lost institution in some way. For instance, the former site of Fu Ren University, which was a prince's palace before it became a Catholic university, became a branch of Beijing Normal University in 1952. This type of reuse after conflict does not mean that the severed history, ethos, or other institutional characteristics will carry over. Each conflict and recovery is highly contextualized.

Further Understanding of Global Classifications

The phenomenon of closing colleges and universities will only become more prevalent in the coming years. The field of international education must remain invested in the topic through scholarship that is not merely focused on domestic contexts but rather continues exploring the issue through a global lens.

College closures due to system contraction, mergers, political pressures, and conflict and war can be identified around the world. Stakeholders can therefore look at the global landscape of closures to understand likely dynamics and consider best practices. While political pressures and conflict might be more unpredictable, leaders in higher education sectors around the world do not simply have to wait for demographic changes. Understanding the diverse varieties of college closures in existence can help sectors grapple with institutional closures more humanely.

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The Role of Flagships in National Research Performance

Daniel Torrano, Darkhan Bilyalov and Ahmet Aypay

Governments increasingly create flagship universities to raise research visibility, attract talent, and signal national ambition. Comparative evidence from six young institutions suggests that this strategy can produce real institutional advantage but not automatic systemwide transformation. The policy challenge for countries creating and supporting flagship universities as policy instruments for systemic reform is to transform institutional advantage in research into systemic spillover impact across their respective higher education systems.

States increasingly concentrate funding, governance flexibility, international talent recruitment, and research infrastructure in a small number of "flagship" institutions with the aim of raising national performance. This concentration strategy, however, also creates a persistent tension. If flagship universities succeed mainly by pulling resources, status, and talent away from other institutions, they may become symbols of excellence without becoming engines of system development. Using Merton's framework of cumulative advantage (or the so-called "Matthew effect"), we examined whether the gap between flagships and national systems widens over time, narrows through spillovers, or remains stable.

A Comparative View of Young Flagships

We examined six universities created since 2000: Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia, Universidade Federal do ABC (UFABC) in Brazil, Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST), and the University of Luxembourg. These universities are new state-enabled projects designed to build research capacity, international engagement, and national innovation in a relatively short period.

Using Scopus and SciVal data from 2010 to 2024, our comparison benchmarks each flagship against its national system across four indicators: citation impact, highly cited publications, publication in leading journals, and international collaboration. A university may be modest by global league-table standards and still be transformative in its own national environment.

The Uneven Flagship Advantage

Across most cases, the selected institutions outperformed their national systems on several research indicators. Nazarbayev University, for example, achieved citation impact levels close to twice the national average and produced highly cited publications at more than two and a half times the national rate. UFABC also maintained a substantial lead over the Brazilian system across several measures. These patterns show that concentrated investment can create a research-performing institution in contexts where national averages remain lower.

The size and meaning of the advantage, however, vary sharply. The University of Luxembourg operates much closer to national benchmarks—not because it lacks quality, but because it is embedded in a relatively mature and internationally connected research environment. In that context, the flagship is less a dramatic outlier than part of a strong national research ecology.

Pathways to Flagship Status

The cases point to different institutional pathways. KAUST has built much of its reputation through influential research and publication in leading journals. BIUST and SUTD show a different profile, with international collaboration as a more prominent area of strength. Nazarbayev University and UFABC appear closer to a balanced model, outperforming national systems on several indicators rather than relying on a single distinctive advantage. For governments, the lesson is that flagship policy cannot be reduced to institutional design alone; it also depends on how the institution is connected to research funding, doctoral education, labor markets, and the broader higher education sector.

Spillover Effects

The most important policy finding concerns spillovers. We therefore tracked the distance between each flagship university and its national system over time for four research performance indicators, yielding 24 flagship-system trajectories across the six countries examined. Only three showed a clear tendency for the flagship to pull further ahead over time. Convergence appeared in seven cases. The most common pattern was stability: in 14 cases, the flagship sustained an advantage, but that advantage neither expanded dramatically nor disappeared.

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While encouraging, the result is also cautionary because a stable advantage is not the same as system transformation. A successful flagship may raise national visibility, create pockets of high-quality research, and attract international partners while leaving the underlying distribution of research capacity largely unchanged. In terms of cumulative advantage, the issue is not simply whether elite institutions get better. It is whether their resources, practices, networks, and training functions become available to the wider system in ways that support parallel growth.

From Flagship Success to System Strategy

Governments therefore need to distinguish short-term research gains from long-term system development. If flagship policy is judged by its contribution to the broader research capacity of the national system, institutional performance indicators are too narrow. They must be complemented by evidence on doctoral training, shared infrastructure, research collaboration, faculty mobility, teaching capacity, and policy engagement.

Nazarbayev University, for instance, operates collective-use laboratories open to researchers from other institutions. Other spillover mechanisms include study-away programs, research internships, visiting faculty schemes, and joint doctoral supervision. These activities are less visible than rankings, but they may matter more for system development because they move people, practices, and research capacity across institutional boundaries.

National grant systems can strengthen sustainability, but they may also create new inequalities if competitions reward indicators that flagships are already better positioned to produce, such as Q1 and first-decile publications, high citation profiles, or internationally connected principal investigators. If public funding systems do not account for these asymmetries, the flagship may win not for its research excellence but because it begins the competition with infrastructure, teaching loads, and global networks unavailable to most peers.

A Broader Lesson for Higher Education Policy

The broader lesson is that flagship universities should be designed as part of a system strategy, not only as symbols of national aspiration. It is unrealistic to expect newly established flagships to transform the wider system immediately. But it is equally risky to assume that spillovers will occur naturally once institutional excellence has been achieved.

Flagship universities are not a substitute for broader investments in doctoral education, research infrastructure, competitive funding, institutional governance, and quality improvement across the sector. The next generation of policy that capitalizes on flagships while investing substantively and substantially in the rest of higher education will create the conditions for the desired spillover effect.

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Geopolitics: From Closed Openness to Closed Closure

Simon Marginson

The US-dominated globalization of the 1990–2015 period is gone, and broad-based support for free research cooperation and cross-border people mobility in higher education (albeit on Anglo-European terms) has gone with it. In a more multipolar global space in which parts of the Global South are rising, research securitization, migration resistance (especially in Anglo-Europe), and an enhanced willingness of governments everywhere to intervene in higher education has become the new normal.

The golden age of neo-imperial globalization was 1990–2015. Global higher education was shaped as a hegemonized space, dominated by Anglo-American language and universities. Cross-border relations were fostered by a normative internationalization defined in the West. In the US and Anglo-Euro world, there was broad support in government, international agencies, and the public sphere for liberal capitalist globalization, economic integration, and convergence. This legitimated every instance of cross-border openness, connection, and passage, including education and science.

The West Was the Best

Pax Americana provided a safe neo-imperial space in which Western countries could focus on economic goals rather than national security, while their electorates tolerated economic globalization and cosmopolitan internationalization in education. It was all of a piece. Cross-border student mobility would foster graduates for international business. Cosmopolitan cultural inclusion in education would optimize the market reach of global companies. Open science would maximize innovation and productivity, with talent flowing to the global centers best able to profit from it, in continuity with colonialism. International student mobility and global scientific cooperation expanded rapidly.

All was expected (at least in Anglo-America) to foster Anglo-American soft and hard power. Western governments were comfortable with openness because it was Western-dominated, predictable, and limited. Academic and scientific networks were technically open but culturally closed, confined to English and the Euro-American episteme, managed by the top Anglo-American universities and reproducing their deeply felt sense of cultural superiority.

Neoliberal marketization was meant to optimize the economic utility of higher education. This suited university leaders. The knowledge economy legitimated them and their status-building projects. They could expand freely in response to social demand for higher education. They still had institutional autonomy, though refashioned as corporate autonomy. They were more regulated than before—by rankings, research assessment, and comparative graduate salaries—but still determined their own programs. However, the commitment of Western nation-states to liberal internationalization could hold only while global economic openness strengthened US global primacy and was seen to benefit capital accumulation.

Surprised by the South

The first sign that things were not evolving as expected was the growing political autonomy and rapid economic and educational advance of countries outside the West—not only China but also Brazil, India, Indonesia, Iran, South Korea, and others—breaking from neocolonialism. China's economy exceeded the US size in purchasing-power terms in 2016, and, between 1990 and 2015, its gross tertiary enrollment ratio rose from 3 percent to 47 percent. The 2023 enrollment ratio was 78 percent, on par with the US at 79 percent, and the peak Chinese universities in science had passed the US in world-leading science in STEM.

Science systems developed in many middle-income and some low-income countries, though papers in languages other than English were still excluded from the global system. Between 2003 and 2015, the number of global science papers in Scopus with authors from China jumped from 88,585 to 406,734 and, by 2022, was 898,949, double the US level. India is now the third largest producer of science, well ahead of the UK, Germany, and Japan.

From Openness to Closure

The rise of the global East and South was facilitated by the open globalization of 1990–2015, which supported the ebbing of colonialism despite the imperial hubris. That genie is now out of the bottle and cannot be stuffed back in. This is not well understood in the West.

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The way forward is through globalization, not against it, into the emerging multipolar world—retaining openness, broadening cultural inclusion, and fostering mutual economic and educational cooperation. Instead we have racist paranoia, deglobalization, and the US–China decoupling designed to thwart the rise of Chinese civilization. It is disaster all around, above all because it is postponing respectful cooperation for ecological survival. The old US geopolitical strategy, to secure inclusive globalization and colonize it, is gone. US-led multilateralism is fading, nation-states are more aggressive, and open doors are no longer the norm.

Fallout in Science

There are multiple forms of educational fallout from geopolitics. Governments display a new willingness to intervene in higher education and science, re-norming global matters as national matters. Few states argue against the principle of a single science network, but many now make decisions that impair communications and research exchange. Soft-power goals recede; hard power is more important. Security concerns, never entirely absent, have become a first-order issue. Spaces shared by Russia and Ukraine, and Russia and the West, are vacant. Passage between Taiwan and China is hard. Palestinian universities and lives are decimated. Universities and scholars in Israel are more isolated.

The US–China coauthorship has been the largest cooperation in science. Surveys find that researchers in both countries strongly support continued scientific cooperation. The partial decoupling is a massive blow to open science and academic freedom with clear epistemic costs. The number of collaborative papers is trending downward, driven down by the 2018 China Initiative's ICE-like persecution of US citizen researchers of Chinese heritage. None were found guilty of espionage or intellectual property theft, but many lost their jobs.

Students have also felt the effects. Between 2015 and 2023, the number of visas granted for Chinese students entering the US fell from 280,000 to less than 90,000, and border harassment has been common. Between 2015 and 2023, US students in China fell from 15,000 to 350. The US government has pressured other Western states to follow by adopting low trust regulation and protracted risk management in dealings with China. Universities have always combined global cooperation with national agendas, but the national securitization of research decisively politicizes and unbalances science. The test of truth is no longer primary.

Shutting up the Shop

The blockages to cross-border cooperation are underpinned by a nativist revolt against cosmopolitanism and migration in many Western countries. It is impossible to achieve a pure national identity based on race or religion, but patriotic nativism offers a form of agency by exploiting fears of the other among voters who are struggling. This drags into the vortex centrist parties and governments themselves struggling to survive. Few at the white supremacist–led rallies against migration are likely to sympathize with efforts to internationalize higher education or with the academic freedom of researchers.

Migration regimes have been toughened in Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, and Trump conducts continuous deportations. Yet most governments cannot stop migration as such. Capitalism needs low-paid labor. When governments want to achieve demonstrable reductions in numbers, the soft target is international students.

Canada has cut its international student intake by over half, and Australia, the UK, and the US have all made student entry more difficult. Denmark has reduced its intake of cross-border students into English-language courses. Norway and Finland have introduced full-cost international student fees. The best antidote to unthinking nativism, and the geopolitics of othering, is the spread of understanding through education. But, until then, it might get worse before it gets better.

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The Changing Landscape of International Student Mobility

Hans de Wit, Philip G. Altbach and Lizhou Wang

International student mobility remains a major aspect of international higher education. But mobility patterns are shifting. While the South–North movement remains primary at the world level, new patterns and modes are emerging. This article addresses the macro-level drivers, economic and financial considerations, soft power, and cultural influences as well as demographic changes, labor market shifts, and migration factors that impact those changing patterns.

In its many diverse forms (including degree study, credit earning, branch campuses, and others), mobility remains a major aspect of international higher education. But mobility patterns are shifting. While the South–North movement remains primary at the world level, new patterns and modes are emerging.

Notably, student and scholar mobility has become a mass enterprise, with, according to UNESCO, more than six million students studying outside their countries in 2021. Although global student mobility is a significant factor and at the core of internationalization efforts, it is limited to a small and mainly elite sector of the student population. Six million global students represent a small proportion of the 254 million students pursuing higher education worldwide. Nevertheless, the mobility of learners, teachers, and scholars has always been a key dimension of higher education.

The term "internationally mobile students" often refers to degree-mobile students who move to a foreign country for educational purposes and receive *a foreign tertiary/higher education degree* on a student visa. The predominant pattern of degree mobility at the world level has been from the Global South to the Global North, although there is also significant degree mobility in the Global North—in particular within Europe and from the US to Europe (as well as the reverse). Initially, the South-to-North flow mainly consisted of small numbers of elites from colonies to the imperial countries. This movement increased significantly after independence (e.g., students traveling to the UK and France). This kind of mobility also extended to other key Anglophone countries, including Australia, Canada, and the US, which have maintained dominant destination positions. On the supply side, the fastest growth in outgoing students has been from Global South countries. From 1995 to 2010, the main sending countries worldwide were China, India, and Malaysia.

Shifting Mobility Patterns

While South-to-North and, to some extent, North-to-North mobility remain numerically dominant, there is a trend toward multipolarity and intraregional student mobility. The past 15 years have witnessed a challenge to the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon and Western countries, with new educational hubs gaining prominence. A more diverse set of countries now exerts greater relative influence in the overall student mobility network.

In particular, intraregional mobility is growing in the South, from low- toward middle-income countries. For China, the top senders are neighbors South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan. For Russia, the top senders are nearby Kazakhstan, China, and Uzbekistan. Likewise, South Korea and Japan have become top study destinations for students from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. For Argentina, all the top sending countries are also from South America: Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Interestingly, some of the sending countries present themselves as new destinations (e.g., Kazakhstan and Vietnam). What drives these changes?

Macro-Level Drivers of International Mobility

In the dynamic landscape of international higher education, macro-level factors—beyond the control of individual countries, higher education institutions, and students—wield significant influence in changing mobility patterns. In many sending countries, the enhancement in higher education quality, along with economic development, plays an important role. For example, in East Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea, the national higher education systems have now achieved excellent quality and become attractive study destinations for international students. Other countries follow.

Economic and Financial Considerations

Another global factor shaping the mobility landscape is the increasing commodification of education. Anglophone high-income countries have particularly benefited financially from this market. For example, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators, in the academic year 2022–2023, over one million international students at US colleges and

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universities contributed more than $40 billion to the US economy and supported more than 368,000 jobs. For the UK, according to a joint report published by the Higher Education Policy Institute, the figure for the total economic contribution was £41.9 billion in the 2021–2022 academic year.

At the same time, high living and tuition costs, coupled with increased xenophobia and visa and other restrictions in the Global North, have driven many students from the South to pursue education in non-Western nations where tuition and living costs are less expensive. These economic pull factors make the emerging study destinations attractive to many international students, especially those from middle-income and lower-income families.

Soft Power and Cultural Influences

Many countries and institutions prioritize international student recruitment as a key target in their strategies for the internationalization of higher education because of the value they place on securing soft power, cross-border cultural influence, and improved university rankings. At the national level, countries utilize strategic policies and national agencies to promote international student recruitment and subsidize inbound mobility. Activities and initiatives involve various national actors that aim to build a comprehensive ecosystem in supporting immigration regulation, university cooperation, language training, and scholarships. Examples include the Indian government, which launched the Study in India flagship project in 2018 in collaboration with various government departments to enhance its global identity through international education initiatives. Similarly, the Education Plan in China's Belt and Road Initiative showcases the political and diplomatic motivations behind its internationalization strategy and international student recruitment.

Demographic Change, Labor Market Influences, and Migration

For many countries in the Global North, significant demographic decline and the need for skilled labor have made it challenging to find sufficient talent domestically. Attracting talented international students, faculty, and professionals, as well as encouraging student retention, is often a crucial strategy for higher education in high-income and middle-income countries.

Important in the abovementioned factors are the many ways in which migration and student mobility cross over. Education functions as a significant migration doorway for a large minority of students moving from the Global South to the Anglophone countries. Tensions and controversies arise regarding international students' post-study options, labor market needs, and immigration policies.

A Complex and Multilayered Landscape

International student mobility is complex and multilayered. It is influenced by a variety of changing contexts and related push and pull factors. There is no such archetype as "*the* international student," as there are different forms of students, stakeholder roles, and motivations for mobility. In degree mobility, one can observe a gradual shift from a predominantly South–North movement toward a more diverse movement, with dominant sending countries, particularly in Asia, increasingly becoming receiving countries.

Revenue generation remains a dominant pull factor in the Anglophone higher education sector. Another key consideration is increasing the stay rate of international students so as to better meet skilled labor needs. At the same time, geopolitical tensions, national security concerns, and nationalist anti-immigration sentiments and policies are becoming important obstacles to international student mobility. While international students and the revenues they generate are important in a few countries, perhaps more important to the global economy as a whole are patterns of high-skilled immigration related to student mobility. These patterns contribute to inequalities, impact remittances, influence scientific collaboration, and affect many other factors in numerous countries.

As countries navigate these complex dynamics, the strategic management of international student flows and integration of skilled graduates into the labor market will be crucial for maximizing the benefits of global education and fostering international collaboration. Ultimately, understanding the evolving nature of international student mobility is essential for policymakers and educators who seek to enhance the internationalization of higher education and address the broader challenges and opportunities it presents.

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Why Student Migration Is Popular — Until It Isn't

Alexander Kustov

International student migration has long been one of the most popular forms of mobility across borders. Yet some countries have moved to restrict it in the past several years. This article applies the lessons on "persuasion by better policy design" from *In Our Interest: How Democracies Can Make Immigration Popular* to explain why student migration usually works politically—and how bad policies can destroy that consensus.

Immigration backlash is reshaping global politics. Yet one form of immigration has long enjoyed remarkably broad support: international student migration. Students pay tuition, fill classrooms, boost local economies, and stay to become skilled workers. In most democracies, the public has viewed international students favorably—even when attitudes toward immigration in general have soured.

That consensus, however, is now fraying. Canada, the UK, and Australia—three of the world's top destinations for international students—have all moved to restrict student immigration in the past several years. What happened? And what do these events tell us about how democracies can manage immigration more effectively?

Research across democracies shows that voters largely care about their compatriots and prefer immigration policies that benefit their own countries. Public support for immigration rises when policies are "demonstrably beneficial" (i.e., when ordinary citizens can see, in practical terms, how immigration serves the national interest). Most voters feel neither unconditionally hostile nor unconditionally welcoming toward immigration. The vast majority hold conditional preferences—supporting it when they believe the system is working and opposing it when they do not. But persuasion through better messaging alone does not cut it; what wins voters' trust are better policies.

Why Student Migration (Mostly) Works

International student migration is a powerful illustration of this framework. Student migration is overwhelmingly popular. Its popularity stems from the fact that students bring money into publicly financed universities, reinvigorate the communities where they study, and are expected to be skilled after they graduate. Interestingly, the most prominent concern people have about international students is not their impact on the host country but the possibility that students may return home rather than staying to contribute.

In the US, international students contribute over $40 billion to the economy annually. In Australia, Canada, and the UK, international tuition effectively subsidizes the cost of education for domestic students. Beyond revenue, those who stay after graduation contribute to innovation and fill labor shortages. Those who return home create lasting networks and spread the host country's culture. This combination of economic contribution and institutional orderliness—students come through a legal channel with clear gatekeeping by universities—makes student migration intuitively appealing across the political spectrum, much like skilled work migration more broadly.

When the Consensus Breaks

Canada offers the most dramatic cautionary tale. Its international student population roughly tripled in a decade, exceeding one million by 2023. Much of this growth was driven not by selective universities but by colleges—including many that Canada's own immigration minister labeled "diploma mills"—that enrolled students in low-quality programs where the primary value was a postgraduation work permit and pathway to permanent residence, not the education itself.

When the product being sold becomes immigration status rather than education, the demonstrable benefits of student migration evaporate. Students were paying high fees for programs with minimal instruction, living in overcrowded housing in suburbs like Brampton and Surrey, and working multiple part-time jobs with poor employment prospects. Local communities bore visible costs—housing pressure, strained infrastructure—without seeing corresponding benefits.

Public support for immigration—previously a Canadian point of pride—plummeted in what observers described as the sharpest shift in Canadian immigration attitudes in the history of the country's polling. As a result, the Canadian government decided to impose a cap on new study permits in 2024, which helped but did not fully resolve the situation or fully win people's trust back.

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Similar dynamics unfolded in the UK and Australia, where rapid growth in student numbers—amplified by a dependent visa surge in the UK and a poorly regulated vocational education sector in Australia—eroded public trust in the student migration system. In both countries, governments moved to tighten restrictions, and the political debate shifted from whether international students were welcome to whether the system was out of control.

In all three countries, the backlash followed a pattern consistent with the demonstrably beneficial framework. Student migration became politically toxic not because voters suddenly turned against education or foreign students, but because policy design failures—diploma mills in Canada, the dependent loophole in the UK, the unregulated vocational sector in Australia—severed the link between student migration and visible public benefits. When students come for education and stay for skills, it works. When the education system becomes a backdoor immigration channel, trust collapses.

The Curious Case of Germany

Germany offers a striking contrast—but perhaps a fragile one. Its public universities provide effectively free higher education to all students, including those from outside the EU—a taxpayer subsidy that might seem like a political flashpoint. Yet international students in Germany have so far generated comparatively little controversy.

German universities still maintain rigorous academic standards. The post-study pathway ties continued residence to securing qualified employment. The 2023 Skilled Immigration Act even expanded work opportunities for foreign graduates—framed not as an immigration concession but as an economic competitiveness strategy to address Germany's well-documented skilled worker shortage. And because domestic students also pay no tuition, international students are not perceived as receiving a special deal.

Germany's stability, however, should not be mistaken for inevitability. If German universities—or a parallel private sector—were to begin using degree programs primarily as immigration pathways for foreigners, outside of democratic oversight and labor market alignment, the same erosion of trust as experienced in Canada could follow. The lesson is not that Germany has found a permanent solution but that its system currently maintains the conditions under which student migration remains demonstrably beneficial: genuine educational quality, labor market linkage, gradual growth, and a framing that emphasizes mutual benefit.

What This Means for Higher Education

For higher education professionals, the central lesson is not to take the popularity of international students for granted. The public support that student migration has traditionally enjoyed is *conditional*; it depends on the system working to benefit citizens, alongside students, as advertised. When universities or governments prioritize enrollment numbers and revenue over educational quality and labor market alignment, or take the role of immigration admissions, they undermine the very foundation of that support. The backlash in Australia, Canada, and the UK is not evidence that student migration is inherently unpopular or that xenophobia permeates everywhere. It is evidence that badly designed student migration policies become unpopular—a distinction with enormous practical implications.

Obviously, replicating Germany's tuition model is not feasible in most countries, where international student fees effectively subsidize domestic education. But governments do have design levers available: robust accreditation that shuts down programs functioning primarily as immigration pathways, post-study work rights tied to qualified employment rather than granted automatically, and enrollment growth calibrated to housing and labor market capacity. None of these require eliminating the revenue benefits of international students; they require ensuring the revenue model does not swallow the educational one.

International student migration can remain popular by design, but only if higher education systems and governments maintain quality, transparency, and visible benefit. The countries that get this right will attract global talent, strengthen their universities, and build durable public support. The countries that do not will discover—as Australia, Canada, and the UK already have—that even the most popular form of immigration can become toxic when voters conclude the system is no longer working in their interest.

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Securitizing Academic Mobility: Chinese Students, National Interest, and Geopolitics in the Philippines

Rosalyn Eder

National interest discourse securitizes academic mobility by transforming international students into geopolitical proxies. By analyzing the Philippine debate over Chinese students near US–Philippine military sites, this article demonstrates how securitization rhetoric legitimizes state surveillance regimes, producing the very threats it claims to address.

International higher education is not apolitical but is shaped by foreign relations and domestic interests. In the past, national interests and national security were rarely invoked in internationalization policies. However, in recent years, governments have responded to mounting geopolitical tensions and domestic pressures by reframing internationalization in terms of concerns about research security and national sovereignty. Yet the invocation of national interest often obscures the domestic political dynamics that shape how internationalization actually operates.

National Interest as Rhetorical Construction

The term "national interest" is contested. It implies consensus on what a nation's interests are. National interest is not a pre-given reality but a social construct produced through discursive processes that link events, identities, and perceived threats into coherent narratives. For this article, national interest is understood as a constitutive rhetorical device that gains power not from describing objective conditions but from its capacity to frame certain situations as threats requiring collective response. In the Philippine case examined here, national interest discourse transforms a small number of international students into symbols of geopolitical threat.

Higher Education, Private Markets, and Constitutional Nationalism

In the Philippines, official higher education policy invokes the national interest as its guiding principle, including the national strategy for the internationalization of higher education. It is often invoked in policy making alongside its core, similarly contested dimensions: national sovereignty and national security. The Philippine Constitution codifies the national interests. In education, it limits the proportion of foreign students in any educational program to no more than one-third of total enrollment, vests control and ownership of educational institutions in Filipino citizens, and generally restricts the practice of all professions to Filipinos. The Philippines is the only ASEAN country where such restrictions on foreign participation in education are embedded in the Constitution rather than in ordinary legislation. These restrictions, permanent fixtures since 1935 reflecting the nation's effort to reverse colonial legacies, significantly impact incoming academic mobility. In the late 1970s, following the political unrest of the First Quarter Storm (1970) and subsequent incidents involving Iranian students who were deported for activities deemed "inimical to national interests" (1980–1981), the Philippine government established a multiagency surveillance apparatus for the administration and monitoring of international students. This infrastructure—spanning six agencies from the Commission on Higher Education to the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency—constitutes a surveillance regime that defines who counts as a bona fide international student, placing the burden of proof on incoming students and limiting their studying and employment opportunities without regard for their pastoral needs.

Securitizing Chinese Students

In the Philippines, international higher education is a politically contested space, despite international students comprising less than 1 percent of its total student population. As of 2022, the Philippines hosted approximately 22,000 international students out of a total enrollment of nearly 3.8 million—roughly 0.6 percent. In 2024, a Philippine congressman claimed that at least 4,600 Chinese students were enrolled at a single private university in Cagayan province. The Bureau of Immigration later confirmed that 1,516 student visas had been issued to Chinese nationals in Cagayan in 2023, with only approximately 400 students physically present; the university reported 486 total foreign students. Although factually incorrect, the claims sparked a heated debate over the authenticity of the Chinese students, as lawmakers questioned the seriousness of their purpose. Policymakers urged the House of Representatives and the Senate to investigate the implications of student visa policy and corruption in the Bureau of Immigration for public safety

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and national security. The language used in the policy discourse, such as "sudden spike," "alarming," "highly suspicious," "us" versus "them," the addressee of the resolutions (Congress Committee on Justice and the Senate Committee on National Defense), and frequent references to major criminal activities involving some Chinese nationals reflect serious concerns about threats to national security and national sovereignty. More importantly, this language expresses fear, distrust, and suspicion not about the students themselves but about what they embody—namely the Chinese government. This pattern, in which a small number of international students are discursively transformed into proxies for a foreign government, echoes the securitization of Chinese students in Australia, the US, and other countries where geopolitical tensions have reshaped the framing of academic mobility.

The Geopolitics of Proximity

Situated in the northeastern Philippines, Cagayan Valley has two of the four new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites designated in 2023. Originally signed in 2014, the EDCA with the US was expanded under the Marcos administration in 2023 with four additional sites, bringing the total to nine. The agreement facilitates large-scale joint military exercises and provides the US access to Philippine military bases across the archipelago. Six of these bases are located near areas of maritime territorial dispute in Southeast Asia. In August 2023, China's Ministry of Natural Resources released a revised nine-dash line map called the 10-dash line map. A new dash was added to claim Taiwan and further assert China's exclusive sovereignty over almost the entirety of the South China Sea and the West Philippine Sea. Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam rejected these claims. On the domestic front, public sentiment toward China's encroachment intensified amid escalating maritime conflicts between the Philippines and China. By March 2024, 76 percent of Filipinos identified China as the greatest threat to the Philippines. The concentration of Chinese students in a province hosting new EDCA sites—during a period when the Philippines and China were engaged in near-daily maritime confrontations—was sufficient to provoke intense political and media reaction. The issue became front-page national news, prompting investigations by at least five senators, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the National Security Council, and the Philippine National Police.

Academic Mobility and the Production of Threat

At the height of the debates, policymakers questioned whether the Philippines was prepared to confront the risks of the internationalization of higher education. The responses to perceived security threats posed by the "influx" of Chinese students in a region critical to national defense marked the country's shifts in foreign policy, from pro-China under the previous Duterte administration to a renewed alliance with the US and Japan under the current president, Marcos, Jr. Although the policy discourse on Chinese students prompted an examination of potential corruption in international student recruitment, the framing of the issues deflected attention from inefficient migration processes and data collection to national security threats. In this context, international Chinese students became scapegoats for domestic anxieties vis-à-vis China, as they became proxies of the Chinese government. This discourse further legitimizes the country's surveillance regime and its cautious stance toward incoming foreign students.

The Philippine case study illustrates the complex relationship between the internationalization of higher education and the geopolitical environment in which it operates as well as the tensions between academic mobility, foreign policy, and national interests. It demonstrates how the discourse of national interest operates as a constitutive force, not merely reflecting but actively producing the security threats it purports to address, with real consequences for international students who become unwitting symbols of geopolitical conflict.

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South-to-South Pathways Reshaping International Student Mobility: The Case of Malaysia

Mayumi Ishikawa

This article examines South-to-South pathways of international student mobility through a case study of three international universities in Malaysia. It argues that religious, ethnic, and regional ties are strategically leveraged to create alternative education pathways beyond conventional East–West or South–North binaries. The study illustrates how the internationalization of higher education is being rearticulated beyond Euro-American models, highlighting the increasing visibility and influence of actors in the Global South.

An increasing number of international students are choosing destinations in the Global South. Drawing on three international universities in Malaysia, this article examines how religious, ethnic, and regional ties are leveraged to create alternative pathways for international student mobility beyond the conventional East–West or South–North binaries. As an emerging hub of international education in Asia, Malaysia offers affordable, culturally and religiously engaged international education, particularly for students seeking options closer to home.

South-to-South educational mobility is not new but has received limited scholarly attention due to assumptions that frame Western destinations as inherently superior. Such assumptions fail to acknowledge the significant contributions of South-to-South educational mobility to human capital and professional development for growing middle-class families across Asia Pacific and students from less privileged backgrounds. The internationalization of higher education is increasingly rearticulated by local and regional needs and priorities, while the global higher education landscape is rapidly evolving, with institutions and actors in the South gaining visibility and influence.

This article focuses on three transnational undertakings: a university focused on Muslim human resource development and alliance building; a Chinese branch campus serving ethnic Chinese communities in Malaysia and beyond; and a provider of private medical education, provided through bilateral cooperation. These three institutions constitute a distinct infrastructure of South-to-South mobility, providing a viable alternative to dominant West-bound mobility models.

Malaysia as a Strategic Destination

As traditional destination countries in the West increasingly regulate international student inflows, many governments and institutions in East and Southeast Asia maintain welcoming policies. Malaysia has emerged as a prominent player by actively hosting international branch campuses, particularly from the UK and Australia. Its socioeconomic stability, wide usage of English, and relative affordability make the country attractive to students and families in the South. Its Muslim majority population, multiethnic society, and Commonwealth ties further enhance its diversity.

The study discussed here examined three transnational institutions in Malaysia: 1) International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), a public national university; 2) Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM), the first overseas branch campus of a leading research university in China; and 3) Manipal University College Malaysia (MUCM), a provider of private medical education through bilateral Indian and Malaysian collaboration. Each institution was facilitated by respective ethnic communities within Malaysia. Despite differences in size, structure, and history, all three are grounded in cross-border mobility of people and knowledge, reflecting deepening relationships outside the Global North. Although linked to specific ethnic constituencies, they recruit students and faculty well beyond the ethnic communities they represent.

Faith-Based Internationalization and Its Constraints

Established in 1983 by the Malaysian government and cosponsored by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, IIUM is a pioneering international Islamic university, as the only public institution in Malaysia where English and Arabic are mediums of instruction. With more than 26,000 students, IIUM offers programs ranging from Islamic studies and law to science, engineering, and medicine, integrating all with Islamic studies.

As of May 2024, IIUM had produced over 116,000 alumni, approximately 16 percent of whom are international and represent 134 countries and territories. About half are from Asia,

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with significant representation from Africa and the Middle East. Major sending countries include Indonesia, Bangladesh, Singapore, Thailand, Nigeria, India, and Yemen. The university also enrolls students from Muslim-minority countries and conflict-affected areas such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Palestine.

IIUM has contributed significantly to capacity building among Muslim communities in the Global South. However, international student numbers have declined, from around 7,000 in 2018 to approximately 2,700 in 2024. Faculty attribute this decline to reduced financial support, increased competition, and sponsors' preference for higher-ranked universities. IIUM thus illustrates both the potential and constraints of inclusive internationalization.

Supporting and Moving beyond the Diaspora

Opened in 2016, XMUM is the largest overseas university branch campus in Malaysia and the first comprehensive offshore campus of a Chinese public university. It provides a reputable higher education pathway for ethnic Chinese communities in Malaysia and the neighboring region, supported by local and international Chinese communities, businesses, associations, and citizens. English is the primary language of instruction, except in selected programs.

Enrollment has expanded rapidly, with projections of 10,000 students by 2027. The target student balance is 60 percent local, 20 percent mainland Chinese, and 20 percent from other international backgrounds. While the campus has a distinctively Chinese cultural flair with large cohorts of ethnic Chinese students, XMUM is enhancing recruitment efforts in Central Asia, East Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

As a nonprofit institution, XMUM offers scholarships that help diversify its student body and recruit qualified students. The university showcases how diaspora networks and cultural affinity are mobilized to establish alternative education pathways beyond Western destinations.

Institutionalizing South-to-South Professional Training Pathways

MUCM specializes in medical education and is smaller in size, albeit with a considerable social impact. Established in 1997 as Melaka Manipal Medical College, it originally offered twinning programs with its parent institution in India, which had long trained Malaysian doctors. According to the university, Manipal has produced more than 10,000 doctors since its inception, meaning almost 20 percent of registered doctors in Malaysia are Manipal graduates. It has also provided access to medical education for students unable to enter competitive public programs, including ethnic minorities.

Today, MUCM offers English-language medical, dental, and health science degrees. As of 2024, approximately 14 percent of its 1,762 students were international, primarily from India and Sri Lanka, Commonwealth countries with similar national medical licensing systems. About one-third of its full-time academic staff came from India. Following its transition to university college status, MUCM became an autonomous private institution incorporated in Malaysia, owned by an Indian company. Students no longer need to complete part of their training in India, and the institution can recruit students directly from India due to formal degree recognition by Indian authorities.

Faculty and student accounts highlight rigorous training, the faculty's strong English proficiency, and the intensity of lectures. MUCM also supports preparation for medical licensing exams such as those in the UK and the US. Manipal's extensive alumni network further facilitates graduates' career placement and mobility. MUCM represents a longstanding model of South-to-South cooperation in professional education.

Conclusion

These three institutions do not conform to the typical East-to-West mobility or knowledge transfer from North to South. Instead, they offer reputable, culturally engaged higher education that responds to ethnoreligious sensitivities while cultivating ties with national and regional economic and professional networks. Their mobility patterns reflect each institution's niche market and outreach through ethnic, cultural, and religious ties; common social and educational frameworks; and growing higher education demands in neighboring regions.

They indicate that Malaysia is not merely a lower-cost substitute for Western education but a rational destination in its own right. They also serve as a reminder that, within a global hierarchy that privileges Western elite degrees, while some students view Malaysia as a strategic alternative, for others it remains a pragmatic "second choice."

Above all, the Malaysian case demonstrates that international student mobility is increasingly multilateral. The expansion of higher education opportunities in the Global South calls for broader discussions of internationalization that transcend Euro-American centrism and North–South binaries. As alternative destinations such as Malaysia thrive, they reshape the geography of global higher education, creating new pathways for students worldwide.

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Beyond the West: Student Mobility — Brazil and China

Jean Max Tavares, Melchior J. Tavares Júnior and Izabela van Ham Colchete

Despite China's emergence as an economic and technological power and its increasing positioning as an international education hub, its potential to attract students from outside Asia remains largely untapped. This article identifies the perceptions, motivations, and barriers that shape Brazilian students' attitudes toward studying in China. The results demonstrate that expanding South–South international student mobility requires strategies that address the linguistic, cultural, and symbolic inequalities inherent in the global higher education system.

One of the clearest effects of globalization within higher education has undoubtedly been an increase in the international mobility of university students. However, this development has not occurred evenly throughout the world. Higher education has itself globalized in an unequal manner, one which reinforces global hierarchies of knowledge production, institutional prestige, and academic mobility, with opportunities remaining concentrated in a limited number of countries and institutions. International student mobility therefore reflects unequal global structures, reproducing distinctions between central and peripheral destinations in the global higher education landscape. This article uses the Brazil–China mobility context as an analytical lens to examine how emerging destinations are positioned within global hierarchies of international higher education.

Uneven Globalization of Higher Education

Despite the expansion of international mobility and universities' efforts to attract international students, critical analyses stress that globalization in higher education is highly uneven. Globalization has not overcome established hierarchies between institutions, regions, and languages to the point where students systematically consider destinations outside the academic mainstream.

Knowledge hierarchies persist, which reflect the widespread perception that knowledge produced in the Global North is more legitimate and widely applicable. They also perpetuate the predominance of English as the primary language of academic recognition. As a result of these entrenched hierarchies, citations, funding, rankings, and symbolic prestige remain concentrated in a limited group of countries. The evidence shows a similar imbalance within mobility statistics, with a small number of countries attracting many foreign students.

Brazil–China Student Mobility

In recent years, China has emerged as a prominent receiving destination, suggesting that these entrenched dynamics in global higher education may be shifting. Nevertheless, despite the distinguished positions of several Chinese higher education institutions in international university rankings and China's status as Brazil's leading trading partner, the country has attracted few Brazilian students to its universities. In 2020, only about 3,000 Portuguese-speaking students were enrolled in Chinese universities, and in 2023, only around 3.3 percent of Brazilian outbound students selected China as their study destination.

A recent study of Brazilian university students sheds light on the dynamics underpinning these figures. Although most students surveyed had no previous travel experience or substantive cultural knowledge about China, nearly half expressed interest in studying in China. This finding indicates that students' interest is not mainly based on firsthand experience but on representations of China as an emerging academic and economic center. Furthermore, students largely indicated that their primary motivations for studying in China were "cultural experience and global exchange" and "academic and technological excellence," whereas direct monetary factors occupied a less prominent position. This suggests that cost considerations do not primarily drive interest in China. Although scholarships are seen as essential, their secondary role suggests that material incentives alone may be insufficient to overcome entrenched symbolic hierarchies.

The students who would not study in China mainly indicated that this was due to "language barriers," with cultural differences and travel costs also playing a role. Students did not see security as an issue. The prominence of language barriers points to the structural role of English as symbolic capital within global knowledge hierarchies. Language here seems to operate as more than a communicative tool; it also serves as a gatekeeping

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mechanism that forms access to internationally recognized academic spaces, confirming the argument on linguistic imperialism.

When combined, the findings suggest that any interest in studying in China originates from intangible motivations, such as scholastic status, modernization, and global recognition. But language barriers show that the mobility of international students is still linked to consolidated language hierarchies and English as their currency. This dynamic seems to be embedded in unequal globalization, even if new and emerging educational centers (such as China) are somewhat visible, and even if limited by cultural asymmetries. Within this context, the limited interest of Brazilian students in China should be interpreted not simply as a matter of individual preference but as due to uneven globalization, in which linguistic capital, scholarly reputation, and symbolic recognition remain hierarchically structured. Despite China's rise as a regional education hub, its capacity to attract students remains largely concentrated among Asian students because there is little available knowledge about academic practices, student life, and the value placed on acquired knowledge, which increases perceptions of uncertainty, even in the absence of high risks. This situation indicates that China remains outside the symbolic US–Europe axis and points to the persistence of a global hierarchy of knowledge in which student mobility continues to reproduce centers and peripheries.

Conclusion

This study was motivated by the lack of empirical research on the factors influencing Brazilian higher education students' decisions to study in China. China was selected as a potential destination not only because of its economic and technological growth but also because its expanding academic capacity coexists with persistent symbolic hierarchies that continue to shape international student mobility. Despite limited cultural knowledge and a lack of prior mobility, a substantial proportion of participants expressed interest in studying in China. At the same time, language barriers appeared as a central deterrent, indicating not individual linguistic difficulty but structural inequalities embedded in the global higher education system. Although grounded in the Brazil–China case, the patterns identified reflect broader dynamics of uneven globalization in international higher education.

The study generated several important recommendations. First, Chinese universities interested in attracting Brazilian students would benefit from strengthening partnerships with Brazilian universities through double-degree agreements, exchange programs, and summer schools. They should also create programs with dedicated classes and reception periods to facilitate the cultural adaptation of Brazilian students. They should further offer degree programs fully taught in English, given that Mandarin Chinese is widely regarded as a high-difficulty language for speakers of Indo-European languages. In addition, Chinese universities should provide clear and targeted information to prospective Brazilian students regarding academic routines, study workloads, and the cost of living. Moreover, the Chinese government could introduce scholarships specifically targeted at Brazilian students, simplify student visa procedures, and promote educational fairs and academic events in Brazil to reduce information asymmetry between Brazilian students and Chinese higher education institutions.

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Mapping Higher Education in Asia

Hamish Coates, Angel Calderon, Muhammad Hali Aprimadya, Soth Meas and Kenneth Moore

Asia has emerged as the epicenter of global higher education transformation. The Mapping Higher Education in Asia briefing situates higher education within broader political, economic, social, and technological environments, revealing a region characterized by immense scale, rapid growth, deep diversity, and persistent structural gaps. The study underscores that Asia is no longer peripheral to global higher education but central to its present and future configurations.

Over the past four decades, Asia has overtaken Europe and North America in student enrollments, creating the largest higher education ecosystem in the world. The Mapping Higher Education in Asia report estimates that, by 2023, there were around 12,600 higher education institutions across the sampled territories, enrolling more than 90 million students. This expansion has been accompanied by significant research growth. Asia's scientific output has surged, particularly in China, which now produces approximately one quarter of global publications. Together with India, Japan, and South Korea, China forms a dominant research bloc that is reshaping global knowledge production patterns.

Yet the report emphasizes a paradox: while Asia leads in scale and growth, it remains underrepresented in global data systems and analytical frameworks. Much of the available data are produced outside the region, highlighting the need for Asia to develop its own indicators, benchmarks, and evidence.

Diversity without a Single Model

One of the briefing's central insights is the difficulty in defining "Asia" as a coherent higher education region. The report adopts a pragmatic approach, selecting 16 territories that represent distinct historical trajectories, cultural contexts, and levels of development. This approach reveals a heterogeneous region where no single education model dominates. Systems range from highly centralized, state-led configurations to market-driven arrangements. Importantly, the report cautions against overreliance on global rankings and conventional benchmarks. While rankings have shaped institutional aspirations and international visibility, they capture only a partial view of the region's complex and evolving dynamics.

Politics, Governance, and the Limits of Determinism

The relationship between political systems and higher education outcomes proves more ambiguous than often assumed. The 16 territories encompass diverse governance, from liberal democracies to single-party states and military regimes. There is no straightforward correlation between politics and institutional performance. Indicators such as corruption control, government effectiveness, press freedom, and academic freedom vary significantly. However, the historical relationship between governance and education development appears weak and contingent. These findings challenge deterministic assumptions about political influence on universities, suggesting more complex dynamics.

Economic Foundations

Economic expansion underpins much of Asia's higher education growth. Despite global disruptions, most sampled economies are expanding, contributing to increased demand for tertiary education and research. At the same time, the region's economic diversity is striking. Advanced economies such as Japan and Singapore are service-dominated, while others, including Cambodia and Indonesia, retain strong industrial bases. These structural differences shape national higher education priorities, from innovation-driven research systems to workforce-oriented teaching models.

However, public investment in education presents a more mixed picture. Education spending as a share of GDP has stagnated or declined in many countries. At the tertiary level, average public expenditure hovers around 0.5 percent of GDP, well below high-income countries.

Demographic Transitions and the Future Student Base

Demographic dynamics represent one of the most significant forces shaping Asia's higher education systems. The region is simultaneously youthful and aging. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Cambodia have growing youth populations, while Japan, South Korea, and China face declining birthrates.

The implications are profound. The traditional 18- to 23-year-old cohort is projected to peak and then decline over the next two decades. Systems will need to adapt, either by expanding international recruitment or by shifting to lifelong learning. The "lifelong learner" cohort (i.e., those aged 24–55) is expanding across most of the region and globally, suggesting that universities will need to redesign curricula, delivery modes, and

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support services to cater to more diverse and nontraditional learners.

Expanding Participation, Persistent Inequality

While education access has improved, disparities remain stark. Participation varies widely (from around 10 percent in Pakistan to over 100 percent in South Korea). Graduation and progression differ significantly, reflecting uneven institutional capacity and resource allocation. While public universities remain dominant in enrollment, about 65 percent of institutions are private, highlighting how market-based provision is meeting demand. These patterns point to a dual system in many countries: mass expansion driven by private providers alongside elite public institutions focused on research and prestige.

System-Level Priorities

Asia's research landscape is marked by both concentration and diversification. The "research powerhouses" (i.e., China, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea) exhibit high levels of R&D investment, researcher density, and global output. "Rising" systems, including India, Vietnam, and Thailand, are rapidly increasing their research activity. A third group has limited research capacity but demonstrates latent potential. Research output has grown dramatically across the region, with China and India showing rapid acceleration. Quality indicators present a more nuanced picture, with several smaller systems (such as Singapore) performing on citation impact and international collaboration.

Internationalization is a critical dimension of higher education, yet Asia remains inward-oriented. In most countries, international students are less than one percent of enrollments. Outbound mobility is growing, particularly from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, underscoring ongoing reliance on prestigious Western systems. At the same time, several countries (notably China, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea) are emerging as regional hubs, attracting increasing numbers of inbound students. The report identifies the untapped potential for intra-Asian mobility.

A recurring theme is the lack of good data in Asia. Basic indicators are often incomplete or inconsistent. Moreover, many common indicators are designed outside the region and fail to capture Asia-specific characteristics, such as rapid development cycles, cultural diversity, and hybrid institutional models.

Toward a New Global Academic Order

Asia is poised to play a defining role in global higher education. Its scale, growth, and increasing capacity position it as a driver of innovation and talent development. This transformation raises critical questions for academics and policymakers worldwide. How will demographic change reshape demand? Where will graduates work? How will Asia's systems interact with those in Africa and other emerging regions? Addressing these questions requires sustained research, improved data, and deeper collaboration across institutions and countries. Asia can no longer be viewed as a collection of national systems but must rather be recognized as an interconnected region with global influence.

For policymakers and university leaders, the message is clear: understanding Asia is no longer optional. As the center of gravity in higher education continues to shift, the region will shape not only its own future but also the direction of global scholarship, mobility, and institutional development.

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A Quiet Form of Regionalism: Northeast Asia's Emerging Knowledge Space

Lizhou Wang and Yusuf Oldac

This article examines scientific collaboration among China, Japan, and South Korea over the past 25 years in the absence of formal institutional integration. Based on Web of Science data, it finds sustained growth in trilateral coauthorship, higher citation impact for joint publications, and increasing diversification beyond STEM fields. Despite geopolitical tensions, collaboration continues to deepen, demonstrating increased regional activity driven by academic networks rather than political structures.

Ask anyone with a passing interest in East Asian affairs to describe relations among China, Japan, and South Korea, and a familiar list will likely emerge: unresolved historical grievances, territorial disputes, lingering wartime memory, and intensifying technological rivalry. In recent years, export controls, semiconductor restrictions, flight cancellations, and growing concerns over "research security" have added a new layer of friction. Universities have not been immune. Since 2019, technology restrictions and heightened scrutiny of scientific collaboration have increasingly drawn academic institutions into geopolitical debates.

Against this backdrop, one might reasonably expect academic collaboration in Northeast Asia to be weakening. Diplomatic tensions often translate into mobility restrictions, suspended exchange agreements, and greater caution toward international partnerships. Yet scientific collaboration tells an interesting story.

The Trilateral Advantage

Web of Science data on 25 years of coauthored publications among China, Japan, and South Korea suggest that scholarly cooperation has continued to expand steadily, even during periods of heightened political strain. Trilateral publications increased more than 70-fold between 2000 and 2024, while the global increase in overall publications in the same time frame was only 8.3-fold. Publications jointly authored by researchers from all three countries consistently achieved higher citation impact than either domestic publications or bilateral collaborations.

Furthermore, collaboration is no longer confined to STEM disciplines, as shown by the volume of research collaboration among these countries. China has emerged as an increasingly important partner for Japan and South Korea in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The most active trilateral collaborations are also concentrated in leading comprehensive universities, many with strong connections to hospitals, technology firms, and applied research centers. International prestige and regional embeddedness therefore appear to reinforce each other, not compete with one another. All of these trends suggest that new spaces for regionally grounded knowledge exchange are taking shape.

Regionalism Without Institutions

These patterns raise a broader question: how is it that academic cooperation has continued to deepen in one of the world's most geopolitically contested regions? Unlike Europe, Northeast Asia has no equivalent of the European Higher Education Area. It has no Erasmus program, joint research funding, supranational governance structure or regional institutional architecture comparable to the EU. Nor does the region resemble the ASEAN's more formalized mechanisms for regional coordination. By conventional standards, Northeast Asia is rich in economic interdependence but underintegrated in institutionalization.

However, patterns of scientific collaboration suggest a more nuanced picture. Over the past two decades, researchers, universities, laboratories, hospitals, and industry-linked research centers have quietly constructed dense networks of cooperation across national borders. Academic exchange, coauthorship, and shared research agendas increasingly perform some of the functions commonly associated with regional integration. Northeast Asia may not constitute a political community, but it is evolving toward "quiet regionalism" in which Northeast Asia functions as a bottom-up knowledge region without corresponding top-down institutional frameworks.

This "quiet" form of regionalization is driven less by governments than by academic communities themselves. Shared disciplinary norms, long-term institutional partnerships, professional incentives tied to global publication, and accumulated interpersonal trust have proven more durable than diplomatic cycles. In this sense, scientific collaboration represents a form of low-politics regionalism: bottom-up, decentralized, and largely self-sustaining.

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Changing National Roles in Regional Knowledge Production

Over the past 25 years, China's domestic research output has surged nearly 29-fold, accompanied by a steadily rising citation impact. Korea's output has also grown significantly, about 4.5-fold, with a slight rise in citation impact. Meanwhile, Japan's growth has been modest, around 9.25%, with its citation impact declining slightly during this period.

China's changing position within Northeast Asia's research ecosystem is an important part of this story. While the UK and the US remain important international research partners for China, Japan, and South Korea alike, China has emerged as the second-most important collaborator for both Japan and South Korea. This trend has become particularly pronounced since the early 2020s.

Perhaps surprisingly, such collaboration is no longer confined to STEM disciplines. China is becoming an increasingly significant partner in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. This suggests that regionally grounded knowledge exchange may be broadening beyond scientific and technological cooperation.

Chinese scholars in the arts, humanities, and social sciences often navigate dual pressures of achieving international research excellence while maintaining ideological conformity, which can constrain their ability to balance national priorities with global publication goals. Collaborating with regional partners in Japan and Korea who share overlapping academic interests and cultural contexts may help mitigate these constraints while strengthening mutual understanding and research productivity.

Relevance Beyond Northeast Asia

The implications extend beyond East Asia. Universities worldwide face a growing tension between geopolitical competition and the practical realities of scientific interdependence. Research-security concerns have become increasingly prominent in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Yet the Northeast Asian experience suggests that geopolitical rivalry does not necessarily dismantle scientific collaboration. It may complicate cooperation, redirect it, and increase its transaction costs, but it does not inevitably halt it.

Scientific collaboration alone cannot resolve historical grievances or eliminate strategic competition. Nor are research networks immune to funding disruptions, tighter regulations, or growing concerns about dual-use technologies. Resilience should not be mistaken for invulnerability. Nevertheless, the broader lesson remains compelling. Building regional research communities may not require political consensus to emerge first. Sustained scholarly cooperation may itself constitute one pathway through which regions gradually accumulate trust, shared practices, and a sense of common purpose.

For policymakers and university leaders, the implication is cautiously optimistic. Attention may be better directed toward strengthening what already exists: supporting early-career researcher mobility, maintaining open channels of academic exchange, and enabling leading universities to act as stable anchors of regional collaboration. Institutions such as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat and initiatives like the A3 Foresight Program already provide partial scaffolding for such cooperation. In doing so, they may be reinforcing one of Northeast Asia's most promising forms of cooperation.

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Brazil Moves Toward South–South Cooperation

Luciane Stallivieri and Hans de Wit

Brazil has taken important steps to stimulate the internationalization of its higher education and South–South cooperation through two new programs: CAPES Global and the *Brasília* Charter with its related CAPES-Move Africa project. These new initiatives intend to primarily focus on South–South cooperation and the development of alliances of universities from the different regions of the country. They manifest a shifting paradigm in the internationalization of higher education from a Western-dominated process to a global phenomenon.

Brazil has taken important steps to stimulate the internationalization of its higher education and South–South cooperation through two new programs: CAPES-Global.edu (hereafter "CAPES Global") and the *Brasília* Charter, which involves the related CAPES-Move Africa project. Like many other higher education systems, Brazil has until now focused primarily on international cooperation with the Global North, with the country's leading research universities dominating the process. The new initiatives by CAPES—the federal agency responsible for quality assurance in Brazilian higher education—intend to break that pattern by primarily focusing on South–South cooperation and by developing alliances of universities from the different regions of the country.

CAPES Global

The new CAPES Global (Networks for Institutional Internationalization) program was inaugurated in April 2026. The program builds on two previous initiatives by CAPES: Science without Borders and CAPES-PrInt. Science without Borders was the flagship program of the Dilma Rousseff administration and ran primarily between 2011 and 2017. It was followed by CAPES-PrInt, launched in 2017 during the Michel Temer government and implemented throughout the Jair Bolsonaro administration (i.e., 2019–2022).

Science without Borders was focused on providing scholarships for study abroad but lacked adequate vision and revision processes as well as institutional capacity for internationalization. This resulted in the development of CAPES-PrInt, which was intended to enhance the organization and policy of internationalization in the main universities in the country. That program indeed helped to improve the internationalization of a small group of selected research universities but faced challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic and radical cuts by the Bolsonaro government. While the former focused on massifying individual mobility, the latter attempted to institutionalize internationalization.

The current CAPES Global program, inaugurated under the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva government (2023–present), represents a third generation of policy that seeks to correct the elitism and regional imbalances of its predecessors. It is designed to modernize the internationalization of higher education in Brazil through collaboration networks; these aim to foster cooperation between national institutions with varying stages of internationalization and to promote, through international cooperation, the development of strategic research and postgraduate activities of participants.

In total, 54 proposals were reviewed in 2026 (the first year of the initiative), covering a broad range of institutions from different regions and states of Brazil. Each network was required to be composed of one coordinating institution and three to five associate members from other regions of the country. The review of these proposals was conducted by a group of experts, both from within Brazil as well as elsewhere in Latin America and from other continents. In total, 33 alliances were selected for funding, a group that involves 33 coordinating institutions and 95 associate members. Of the institutions, 72 are federal universities, 30 are state universities, and 10 are private institutions, with good representation from the Northern, Northeastern, and Central-Western regions.

Challenges and Fragilities

Although the program has addressed many challenges identified within the previous initiatives, it also faces notable fragilities. Its primary weakness is the persistent "mobility-first" mindset: many participating institutions still view internationalization through the narrow lens of outbound scholarships rather than considering internationalization at home or curriculum reform as viable strategies for internationalization.

Additionally, there is a structural "dependency" on the Global North for research validation, which may hinder the program's ambitious goal of fostering meaningful South–South cooperation. This structural dependency on the Global North transcends mere research validation; it reflects an entrenched

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epistemic hierarchy that historically delegitimizes South-centric knowledge systems. To truly pivot toward meaningful South–South cooperation, Brazilian institutions must confront the tendency to replicate Northern standards at the expense of local relevance. The transition from the elite-driven models of Science without Borders and CAPES-PrInt to the current network-based approach requires more than just new funding routes; it demands an ontological shift. True internationalization must be measured by its capacity to foster "epistemic justice," ensuring that Southern perspectives on issues like climate change and food security are treated as foundational rather than peripheral.

The intention of the initiative is that the networks operate as alliances working together on the themes they have identified, create a common ground for further cooperation, and stimulate the internationalization of the member institutions and the alliance. The participating universities and CAPES are aware of the challenges they face in realizing these objectives, and for that reason, an intensive ongoing review process—something missing in the previous two programs—will be developed.

For CAPES Global to achieve long-term success and social legitimacy, it must move beyond traditional metrics such as "number of papers published" or "students sent abroad." Ultimately, the impact of these 33 alliances must not be felt primarily in university rankings but instead in the democratization of knowledge, ensuring that a student in the North or Northeast of Brazil has the same global opportunities as one in the South or Southeast, and in the stimulation of South–South cooperation.

The Brasília Charter and the CAPES-Move Africa Program

The second contemporary initiative, the *Brasília* Charter, focuses on the strengthening of academic and scientific networks between Brazil and African countries. This includes the expansion of mobility (both face-to-face and virtual) of undergraduate and graduate students, researchers, administrative personnel, and managers; cooperation in teacher training; the promotion of open science mechanisms to share science outputs; and active participation in innovation ecosystems. In addition, the *Brasília* Charter focuses on collaborative research, technology, and innovation in priority areas, with emphasis, among others, on the fight against hunger and food security; agrarian development; climate change; blue and green economies; and digital sovereignty and democratization.

The CAPES-Move Africa program, also launched this year, is the first step in implementing the *Brasília* Charter. CAPES-Move Africa is a US$47.4 million postgraduate scholarship program for 2,600 African students—1,000 master and 1,600 doctoral students—to study at Brazilian universities and higher education institutions. The collaboration focuses on four strategic areas—agriculture, health, technology, and AI—and aims to facilitate joint research, the exchange of faculty and students, curriculum development, and the mobility of postgraduate students.

A Shifting Paradigm

The Brazilian initiatives manifest a shifting paradigm in the internationalization of higher education from a Western-dominated process toward more attention to inclusion and diversity within and between the countries in the Global South. The emergence of these initiatives marks a maturing of Brazilian educational diplomacy, where the "global" is no longer synonymous with the "North." By intertwining internal regional democratization, rectifying the historical neglect of Northern and Northeastern Brazilian institutions, with strategic African alliances, Brazil is redefining the role of the university as an agent of social equity. This "third generation" of policy moves beyond the pursuit of prestige in global rankings to focus on the democratization of knowledge. However, the success of this shift depends on whether these networks can move past traditional bibliometric metrics and embrace a model where impact is measured by community development and shared sovereignty. Responsible internationalization is not merely an exercise in academic exchange but a radical commitment to global equity and the ethical co-construction of knowledge across borders.

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What Is an International Branch Campus?

Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit

International branch campuses are expanding rapidly around the world, now numbering 384. While most are sponsored by universities in the Global North and located in the South, there is a trend toward globalization with branches sponsored by India, Egypt, and other countries. Yet there are no clear definitions of what branch campuses are; most seem to be limited professional programs rather than full campuses. This article analyzes the scope and nature of branch campuses globally.

International branch campuses (IBCs) are the flavor of the year, a key part of an expanding range of transnational education (TNE) activities. They are appearing in many countries, mainly but not only in the Global South. There is no commonly accepted definition, but C-BERT uses the following: "An entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign higher education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider." C-BERT reports that there are 384 IBCs worldwide in 2026, up from 333 in 2023. There are 40 home countries, and branches operate in 85 countries. Their fragility is clear from the fact that 74 campuses over the years have been closed. While branch campuses have a long history, most have been established in the past several decades.

Motivations for Branch Campuses in the Mid-21st Century

IBCs reflect a huge diversity of realities. Sponsoring (home) institutions have many motivations, a topic worth careful research. A key motivator is to earn money from their branches, especially at times when universities in Anglophone countries are faced with both budgetary and demographic challenges at home. A number of the main host countries for international students, including Australia, Britain, Canada, and the US—in part because of populist anti-immigrant pressure, but also due to housing shortages and other factors—have made it much more difficult for international students to come to the home campus. In this context, branches and other TNE activities can offer a way of educating (and collecting fees) from international students without worrying about visa delays, government-imposed fees, restrictions on bringing family members, and a variety of other impediments to global mobility imposed by rich country governments.

But there are other rationales for developing IBCs and other TNE operations. Countries like Germany and France support them as part of their foreign policy and talent recruitment policies. Other countries—Iran and Russia are clear examples, and increasingly, China—are very active in developing IBCs because they see these institutions as part of their political influence and broader global economic and cultural presence.

Most IBCs Are Not Really Campuses

Unfortunately, there are not yet fully complete or accurate data concerning the diverse nature of IBCs worldwide. Further, it is not always clear if an IBC is really a branch or one of the many different types of TNE, as noted in a recent IHE article by Wilkins and Huisman.

However, it seems clear that the very large majority of IBCs are not full-fledged academic institutions of a home university located in another country. Rather, most branch campuses are limited institutions offering a few specialized degree programs, largely at the postgraduate (graduate) level and in professional fields. Often, these "campuses" are rented premises in office buildings with classrooms set up for lectures from faculty members at the home universities who are not "on site." Sponsoring institutions or businesses often provide facilities for the branch operations. Some of the new branch campuses in GIFT City in Gujarat, India, are examples of such limited specialized postgraduate degree programs located in office buildings; there are many others. In most cases, IBCs might better be called "branch programs" rather than branch campuses.

Few branch campuses have full-time professors from the home university. More often, home campus faculty make occasional visits to the branch to offer condensed courses or teach remotely. Full-time faculty may be hired from the local or international market and provided with appointments from the home university. There are ample examples of students criticizing the quality of the teachers in such operations.

Some Branches Are Real Institutions

Some branches have facilities on a partner institution's campus. An example is the well-established branch of Australia's Monash University at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, founded in 2008. The branch occupies its own building on the IIT campus and offers joint doctoral degrees with supervision by faculty at both institutions.

A small number of branch campuses have fully operational campuses offering a range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. In almost all cases, the campus buildings and other

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facilities have been provided by local governments, philanthropic organizations, or sometimes property developers. Among the more impressive examples are Education City in Qatar, which provides facilities for six (mainly American) universities offering a range of specialized degrees in such fields as medicine, business, journalism, and others. Funding and supervision are provided by the Qatar Foundation. Several full-campus branch institutions are located in China, where often quite impressive facilities have been provided by various Chinese government entities. These include Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, New York University Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, and several others. Interestingly, Liverpool University has been pressured by its Chinese partner (all Chinese branch campuses are required to partner with a Chinese institution) to improve its research output. These full branches typically have at least some full-time faculty and staff from the home institution.

Dramatic Expansion by Global South Universities

A recent trend in the world of branch campuses is the expansion of Global South universities into the branch campus business. India's 2020 National Education Policy for the first time opened the door to foreign branch campuses coming to India. A half-dozen are now operating, several in Gujarat's GIFT City and mostly from the UK and Australia. Most offer limited professional programs, although at least one Indian conglomerate is planning to build a full campus for a foreign university. At least 15 Indian universities have set up branches outside of India, primarily in the Gulf countries, again with limited professional programs. Two of India's prestigious IITs have established foreign branches—in Zanzibar and Abu Dhabi—despite the fact that many of the home IIT campuses have staff shortages. Egypt has announced one of the largest expansions of branch campuses to expand its "soft power" and for other purposes. The government has approved branch campuses in Eritrea, Malaysia, Niger, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, and others. Some of these campuses are operational; others are in the planning stage.

Within-Country Branches

While clearly not IBCs, there is a recent trend of universities within a country establishing branches in other locations in the country. A pioneer in this area is Northeastern University, with its main campus in Boston and now with branches in Oakland, California (where it purchased an existing institution, Mills College); Charlotte, North Carolina; Miami, Florida; Toronto, Canada; and London, England, the latter two being international. A number of British provincial universities, including Coventry, Portsmouth, Warwick Business School, and others, have established outposts in London to attract international students and local students from the London region. Several provincial Japanese universities have branches in Tokyo. With a few exceptions, these branches offer specialized subjects deemed to be attractive to students and not the full curriculum, and many provide master or other professional degrees exclusively.

Conclusion

It is clear from this discussion that the number of IBCs is increasing and that there is a trend from a North-to-South movement in IBCs toward a global phenomenon. Similar to other TNE operations, the rapid global development of IBCs results in a greater variety of rationales, meanings, and activities. It is not always clear if it is a campus or a program, if it is a branch or another activity, or a combination. Understanding and analyzing TNE and IBCs is even more important now that these operations are on the rise. And with many aspects of TNE, *caveat emptor.* Let the buyer beware—both the receiving countries and students.

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Recruitment Agents in the Grey Zone of International Student Recruitment

Elena Denisova-Schmidt and Tatiana Sitchinava

International student recruitment agents have become central actors in global higher education. Yet their growing influence raises ethical, academic, and regulatory concerns. Drawing on the case of Georgia, this article examines how reliance on agents can support access while also encouraging over-commercialization and argues that agents require stronger transparency, oversight, and accountability.

International student recruitment has become one of the most competitive areas of global higher education. As universities seek to diversify campuses, generate revenue, and strengthen their international profiles, many rely on recruitment agents to reach students in markets where they have limited visibility or no permanent presence. These agents—companies or individuals contracted to identify, advise, and sometimes guide applicants through admissions and visa procedures—have become central actors in international higher education.

Their role is often presented in practical terms. Agents help students navigate unfamiliar systems, translate institutional requirements, prepare documentation, and understand application procedures. For students without strong social networks, international experience, or access to reliable public advising, agents can provide a crucial bridge to higher education abroad. They may also help universities enter new markets without establishing costly overseas offices. In this sense, agents can expand access and make international study possible for students who might otherwise be excluded.

Yet this positive view captures only part of the story. Recruitment agents also raise ethical, academic, and regulatory concerns. Commission-based work rewards the number of students placed rather than the quality of the academic match. It can create conflicts of interest, especially when students believe they are receiving impartial advice while agents are financially incentivized to recommend particular institutions or programs. These risks can be further complicated by "double-dipping," when agents receive payments from both universities and students without always disclosing this dual financial interest.

This arrangement can distort the purposes of internationalization. Instead of promoting academic exchange, intercultural learning, or sustainable institutional partnerships, recruitment can become a numbers-driven business. Students may receive incomplete or misleading information about program quality, costs, degree recognition, employment prospects, or migration opportunities. Institutions may admit students whose academic preparation, language proficiency, or expectations do not align with the program. In more serious cases, agents may blur the line between legitimate support and inappropriate assistance with applications, thereby undermining admissions integrity.

The central issue, therefore, is not whether agents are useful; in many contexts, they clearly are. The issue is that agents are ambivalent actors: they solve real problems while also creating opacity, dependency, and conflicts of interest. Treating them as either indispensable partners or inherently unethical actors is too simplistic. What is needed is a careful assessment of how they operate, who benefits, who bears the risks, and what accountability mechanisms are in place.

Lessons from Post-Soviet Georgia

The case of Georgia illustrates these tensions clearly. Over the past several years, Georgia has experienced rapid growth in higher education, driven in large part by international student enrollment. In 2024–2025, the country had nearly 188,000 students, a significant number for a population of approximately 3.7 million. International students numbered around 37,100, meaning that nearly one in five students in Georgian higher education came from abroad. This expansion has been especially visible in private institutions and medical programs.

Georgia's appeal is understandable. Tuition fees are comparatively affordable, living costs are relatively low, and the country is widely perceived as safe. English-taught medical programs have been especially attractive to students from India, the Middle East, and other regions. Medical education also creates long-term revenue for institutions because programs typically last six years. As a result, international recruitment has become a major component of institutional growth, particularly for private universities.

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This growth has been accompanied by a significant expansion in the role of recruitment agents. In a context where many Georgian institutions have limited international visibility and underdeveloped internationalization strategies, agents have often become the primary link between universities and prospective students. They promote programs abroad, guide students through applications, and help them manage administrative procedures. For international students unfamiliar with Georgia's language, higher education system, and bureaucratic requirements, agents often become the main source of information and support.

The Risks of Outsourcing Recruitment

The Georgian case also shows why this reliance is risky. According to interview data from a national study on academic and research integrity in Georgia, agents became especially influential after 2022, when many international students transferred from Ukraine following the Russian invasion. A significant number of these students, many from India and the Middle East, entered Georgian medical programs. Georgian institutions played an important role by allowing displaced students to continue their studies. However, respondents also described recruitment in this area as a "big business," particularly in medicine.

This description is revealing. It suggests that recruitment was not only a humanitarian or educational response but also a commercial opportunity. Private universities benefited from increased enrollment. Agents benefited from commissions. Students benefited from continuity of study, but they were also placed in a system where academic fit, preparedness, language ability, and quality assurance may not always have received sufficient attention. In such a setting, financial incentives can begin to dominate educational judgment.

This is not a problem unique to Georgia. Similar dynamics are emerging in other countries seeking to become regional education hubs, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Both countries have seen rising numbers of international students and growing interest in medical education. Like Georgia, they may rely increasingly on recruitment intermediaries to access foreign markets. The lesson from Georgia is that rapid internationalization without strong governance can quickly become over-commercialized.

Balancing Access and Integrity

A more responsible approach would begin with transparency. Students should know whether an agent is paid by a university, how commissions work, and whether the agent represents one institution or many. Universities should publish clear information about authorized agents and take responsibility for their conduct. Governments and quality assurance bodies should require institutions to monitor recruitment practices and student outcomes, rather than treating recruitment as an external marketing activity beyond academic oversight.

Second, institutions should evaluate recruitment not only by enrollment numbers but also by student success. Retention, academic performance, complaints, visa problems, and graduation outcomes should be part of the assessment of agent performance. If an agent consistently recruits students who are poorly prepared or misinformed, the institution should end the relationship. Ethical recruitment must be connected to educational responsibility.

Third, students need access to independent information. Public advising services; transparent admissions requirements; and clear communication about costs, recognition, language expectations, and professional pathways can reduce overdependence on agents. Agents are most powerful where official information is weak or difficult to access. Strengthening student-facing information is therefore one of the best ways to reduce risk.

Finally, universities should resist the temptation to outsource internationalization entirely. Recruitment is not merely a sales function; it shapes the composition of the student body, the quality of academic programs, and institutional reputation. When recruitment is treated only as a revenue strategy, internationalization loses its educational purpose.

Recruitment agents will remain part of international higher education. In many systems, they are too embedded, useful, and commercially important to disappear. But the Georgian case shows how quickly agents can become powerful intermediaries when regulation is limited and institutions depend financially on foreign student fees. The challenge is not simply to use agents more efficiently but to govern them more carefully.

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The Resilient Garden: Supporting Academia in Crisis

Anastasiya Leukhina, Anastasiia Lutsenko, Natalia Otrishchenko, Natalia Tsybuliak and Daria Yashkina

The Ukrainian case reveals an important dilemma for international higher education: programs that protect scholars at risk may weaken home academic systems if they support individuals without sustaining the institutions, teams, and professional relationships around them. Drawing on evidence from an international support scheme working with scholars from Ukraine, this analysis argues for mobility designed as connection rather than extraction.

A garden cannot be preserved by rescuing a few individual plants while neglecting the soil, irrigation system, and connections among roots. This metaphor, developed during a discussion within the Ukraine Research Network@ZOiS (UNET), captures a policy dilemma that extends far beyond Ukraine: how can international higher education protect scholars at risk without weakening the academic ecosystems to which they belong?

The scale of the challenge is global. Scholars at Risk's Free to Think 2025 report documented 395 attacks arising from 328 verified incidents in 49 countries and territories between July 2024 and late June 2025. The contexts are not interchangeable. War, repression, forced displacement, and restrictions on academic freedom affect higher education differently in places such as Gaza, Syria, Ukraine, and other conflict-affected settings. Yet these distinct contexts raise a shared design question: what happens when support systems rescue individuals but do not sustain the teams, institutions, and professional relationships around them? Does international assistance preserve only individual careers, or does it also sustain the academic relationships needed for future recovery?

Emergency support is necessarily organized around individuals. Fellowships, visiting positions, and temporary affiliations can provide safety, income, and the ability to continue working. These are meaningful achievements. But the indicators most visible to funders and host institutions—placements, fellowships, and individual outputs—do not capture what happens within home systems. When an emergency becomes prolonged, a model built for rescue may leave the home academic sector weaker if it does not also preserve departments, research groups, and mentorship chains.

The Ukrainian Case

Ukraine is not a universal template for understanding academic life during war, but the Ukrainian case does make visible a structural problem that may arise, in different forms, in other prolonged crises. Evidence from the Ukrainian case shows that individual scholars have been dramatically affected by the current conflict but also indicates that the disruption extends far beyond individual mobility. UNESCO reported that, by January 2024, 12 percent of Ukrainian academics had been forced to emigrate or relocate internally. It also documented 1,443 buildings belonging to 177 public scientific institutions that were damaged or destroyed. These losses affect not only careers but also laboratories, departments, doctoral supervision, archives, and professional communities.

Physical safety should not be mistaken for recovery. Indeed, our recent study of Ukrainian academics found that, of all staff sampled, external migrants reported the highest level of emotional exhaustion (67 percent, compared with 52 percent of internal migrants and 53 percent of those who had not moved). These findings complicate a simple division between scholars who leave and those who remain. Scholars abroad may be physically safer but face temporary contracts, repeated applications, family separation, and uncertain career paths. Scholars who remain sustain teaching, supervision, administration, and research under disrupted conditions. Both groups belong to the same academic landscape, and the resilience of that landscape depends on maintaining relationships across locations.

When Rescue Becomes Extraction

Indeed, the risk of emotional exhaustion is not mobility itself, but mobility disconnected from home academic ecosystems. Individual fellowships are indispensable: they protect careers and, in some cases, lives. Yet prolonged, atomized support can unintentionally cause stress for individuals and weaken the institutions that scholars may later help rebuild. This argument should not be read as evidence that fellowships themselves cause institutional decline. Rather, it identifies a blind spot in how their success is often assessed: home-side effects remain less visible than the outcomes of individual placements.

The risk goes beyond conventional brain drain. When key scholars become detached from their home departments and research teams for extended periods, mentorship chains, doctoral training, institutional memory, and disciplinary

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communities may erode. The danger is especially acute for mid-career scholars, who often hold together research groups and supervise emerging generations of academics. Meanwhile, colleagues who remain inside the affected system carry growing teaching, administrative, and emotional burdens.

Designing Support as Connection

The implications are significant. Most importantly, the evidence suggests that international assistance should be designed around the relationships that sustain academic life. The unit of support should expand beyond the displaced individual to include the academic relationship: scholar and home institution, scholar abroad and home-based team, host university and home department, funder and field of study. Paired or dual grant schemes could link scholars who remain in crisis-affected settings, displaced scholars, and international partners. Instead of supporting individuals in isolation, programs could strengthen joint teams across locations.

Such grants could fund shared supervision, coauthored research, guest teaching, methodological training, digital infrastructure, research assistants based in the home country, and small grants for home-based teams. Fellowships could also include resources to maintain collaboration with home institutions and to support junior colleagues. In this way, mobility would strengthen rather than unintentionally drain the academic ecosystems scholars may later help rebuild, while also providing crucial emotional support for those who do migrate.

Evaluation should change accordingly. Success cannot be measured only by the number of scholars placed abroad or publications produced during a fellowship. Programs should also ask whether supervision continues across borders, whether home-based teams retain capacity, whether hidden labor is recognized, and whether scholars have realistic pathways to reconnect with or return to their institutions.

Support should also be longer, clearer, and less administratively exhausting. Very short fellowships can create a cycle of repeated uncertainty and reapplication. Longer schemes, transparent renewal rules, career advice, and realistic information about future opportunities would reduce pressure on scholars and improve planning for both home and host institutions.

Fair collaboration also requires recognition of hidden labor. Scholars who remain in crisis-affected countries often provide field access, language mediation, contextual interpretation, logistical coordination, and informal support for international projects. This work should be explicitly budgeted and credited. Scholars in affected systems should be recognized as intellectual partners, not treated primarily as sources of local access or logistical assistance.

Cultivating the Ecosystem

The resilient garden metaphor challenges two inadequate narratives. The first is the heroic narrative, in which researchers affected by war are expected to remain endlessly resilient. The second is the rescue narrative, in which international support is framed as a one-way intervention focused primarily on individuals. A garden requires shared labor, local knowledge, long-term care, and attention to conditions that are not always visible above the surface. For international support initiatives, sustaining the garden means sustaining the soil: institutions, teams, disciplines, mentorship structures, and professional communities. It means supporting the roots through stable funding, psychological sustainability, fair collaboration, and pathways for reconnection or reintegration.

The Ukrainian case does not provide a universal template for other crises. It reveals, however, a broader principle: in prolonged emergencies, success should be assessed by the relationships preserved and the academic ecosystems sustained.

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Doctoral Expansion without Quality Gains: Lessons from Uzbekistan

Kobil Ruziev

Many post-Soviet governments attempted to strengthen doctoral education through publication requirements and financial incentives to improve quality and attract talent. Uzbekistan's recent experience reveals both gains and limits. Despite more demanding top-down rules, doctoral awards have expanded rapidly without corresponding quality gains. Weak capacity, informal practices, and low trust in enforcement foster superficial compliance and highlight the need for bottom-up participatory governance that aligns rules, incentives, capacity building, and shared norms of academic integrity.

Doctoral education has become central to the science and technology policies of many countries, where it is often viewed as a driver of innovation, academic workforce development, and national competitiveness. This is especially relevant in emerging economies, where universities are expected to strengthen research–teaching and research–innovation linkages and support economic modernization. By transmitting values and norms that shape the future behavior of citizens and professionals, doctoral education is also assumed to promote fairness, impartiality, and meritocracy as foundations of pro-growth institutions.

Uzbekistan, a late reformer in doctoral education, offers a revealing case. Since 2017, doctoral education has been tied closely to the country's modernization agenda. The government's 2030 goals include nearly doubling the share of academic staff with doctorates to 70 percent, improving research quality, increasing international visibility, raising university rankings, and making higher education a corruption-free sector. Yet Uzbekistan's experience, echoed across several post-Soviet countries, shows that, while the reform logic is compelling, the chosen approach captures only part of the challenge. Where capacity is limited, enforcement is uneven, and informal practices are prevalent, reform risks producing the appearance of compliance rather than genuine quality gains.

The Appearance of Formal Compliance

Uzbekistan has combined more demanding formal requirements with financial incentives intended to attract talent and improve research quality and impact. Doctoral candidates must now publish in peer-reviewed journals and provide evidence of real-world application to defend their dissertations. At the same time, academic salaries have increased up to fourfold, stipends have become more attractive, and holders of PhD and Doctor of Science degrees receive salary premiums of up to 30 percent and 60 percent, respectively. Together, these measures have raised the returns to doctoral study.

Despite the more demanding rules, doctoral awards have expanded rapidly: more than 6,000 doctorates have been awarded since 2017. Yet, because institutional capacity has remained weak, the expected quality gains have not materialized. Candidates often lack access to contemporary literature, databases, methods training, language support, and adequate supervision, while many supervisors have limited exposure to international research practices.

This creates predictable distortions. In weak-capacity environments, rules meant to raise standards can shift attention from genuine knowledge production to symbolic compliance. Publication counts, evidence letters, and completed defenses then become indicators of procedural success without necessarily reflecting independent research capability. In a top-down higher education governance context, universities and supervisors face pressure to demonstrate progress against quantitative targets rather than substantive research competence, while candidates are incentivized to secure the outputs needed for defense.

Uzbekistan's experience therefore illustrates a broader reform dilemma. Publication rules, financial incentives, and capacity investment all matter, but their effects depend on the institutional environment in which they operate. Where enforcement is uneven, informal practices are normalized, and trust in merit-based rules is weak, more demanding requirements produce compliance on paper while leaving underlying academic standards largely unchanged. Similar dynamics observed in Central and Eastern Europe, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine suggest that doctoral reform cannot rely on rules, targets, and incentives alone. Its effectiveness depends on whether formal requirements are embedded in adequate capacity, participatory governance, and shared professional norms that make merit-based achievement the only credible route to academic advancement.

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Limits of Incentives and Metrics

Financial incentives can reshape behavior, but not always as intended. In Uzbekistan, higher salaries, stipends, and degree premiums have made academic careers and doctoral study more attractive after years of low pay. Yet when the returns to doctoral degrees rise faster than research capacity, professional norms, and confidence in impartial enforcement, they also raise the value of shortcuts. If a doctorate brings salary gains, promotion prospects, and status while quality assurance remains weak, some candidates may come to see the degree less as a scholarly achievement than as a credential to be secured. A system may produce more doctoral graduates, publications, and formally compliant dissertations without developing independent researchers. The result is a capacity illusion: an apparent expansion of research capability without the institutional foundations needed to sustain high-quality scholarship.

In Uzbekistan, this illusion is reinforced by informal practices throughout the doctoral journey. At admission, candidates often rely on informal connections. In selecting supervisors, influence within academic councils can sometimes outweigh research expertise. During doctoral study, informal support may help candidates navigate formal requirements. Publication requirements may be met through predatory journals or paid publication services, dissertations may be partially or wholly outsourced through ghostwriting, evidence of real-world application may be secured through personal networks, and dissertation defenses may involve rehearsed responses or prearranged questions.

Importantly, these practices are not merely isolated abuses. They reflect a deeper misalignment between incentives, capacity, and academic norms. When formal requirements are difficult to satisfy through legitimate scholarly effort, and when enforcement is perceived as negotiable or selectively applied, candidates face strong incentives to pursue procedural success rather than substantive research development.

Research Environment as a Shared Resource

A doctoral system is more than regulations, funding, and degree requirements. It is also a research environment shaped by material resources and less tangible but more critical factors such as trust, reputation, peer judgment, ethical standards, and confidence that merit-based rules apply equally to all. Research quality depends on shared expectations about acceptable scholarly behavior. Supervisors must mentor rather than merely approve paperwork, examiners must assess dissertations substantively, universities must treat integrity as a professional obligation, and candidates must believe that genuine effort will be recognized and shortcuts sanctioned.

This environment is a shared resource: it is sustained when actors protect standards and depleted when they tolerate practices that weaken trust. If predatory publications are accepted, ghostwritten dissertations pass, evidence letters circulate without genuine application, informal networks smooth defense, and sanctions are rare or selective, confidence in formal rules erodes. A self-reinforcing cycle follows: limited capacity makes legitimate compliance difficult; high rewards increase shortcuts; shortcuts weaken confidence in rules; and declining confidence makes informal support more attractive, privileging connectedness over merit.

From Control to Coproduction

The policy implication is not that publication requirements should be abandoned, financial incentives dismissed, or capacity building neglected. Candidates and supervisors need better access to infrastructure, literature, methods training, writing support, and structured supervision. These investments are essential.

But they must be embedded in credible academic governance. Doctoral reform should move from compliance control to the coproduction of standards. Academic communities need a meaningful role in defining quality expectations, designing supervisory responsibilities, reviewing progress, identifying predatory publishing risks, and developing fair procedures for sanctioning misconduct. Supervisor development should cover research design, publication ethics, academic writing, mentoring, and responsible authorship.

Uzbekistan's experience, therefore, offers lessons for other post-Soviet countries and beyond. Doctoral reform cannot be achieved through ambitious targets, financial incentives, and capacity investment alone. The greater challenge is to build an academic environment in which shared norms and sustained integrity make formal rules credible in practice. In post-Soviet contexts, this also requires greater institutional autonomy and merit-based accountability. If reform strengthens shared responsibility and credible academic standards, it can become a foundation for research capacity and institutional modernization. Without shared norms, academic integrity, and autonomous institutions capable of competing on merit, doctoral reform may expand credentials while leaving the deeper architecture of research quality unchanged.

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The Quest for Pedagogical Reform: Lessons from Legal Education in Latin America

Sandra Escamilla Cerón

Pedagogical reform often draws on successful educational approaches and best practices from different contexts to improve the quality of teaching and learning. However, uncritical adoption of pedagogy from elsewhere can lead to significant misalignment with local contexts. Legal education in Brazil and Mexico offers an illustrative example; in both countries, imported pedagogical methods have largely failed to take root due to discrepancies with the local professional and disciplinary environments. The implications are significant for legal education but also pedagogical reform in higher education more generally.

Latin America has undergone rapid social, economic, and political changes in recent decades, placing increasing pressure on universities to adapt amid the expansion of higher education in the region. In legal education, these changes have generated demands for a new type of legal training capable of preparing lawyers to navigate an increasingly complex legal environment.

As a result, reformers have drawn on models developed in common-law countries (e.g., the Socratic method and the clinical education model) and have encouraged their use in legal education, often with limited attention to how these pedagogies align with local institutional conditions, sector characteristics, and educational objectives. Using examples from legal education in Brazil and Mexico, this article identifies the challenges posed by pedagogical reform and their consequences. It argues that evaluating pedagogical innovation must extend beyond simply assessing the apparent benefits of pedagogies to include a comprehensive analysis of how well they fit with the institution's realities and disciplinary contexts, as well as their potential implications for inequality within and across institutions.

Legal Education Reforms in Mexico and Brazil

Mirroring the global trend of massification in higher education, Mexico and Brazil have seen rapid growth in law schools. Currently, both countries are among the largest legal education systems worldwide, with Brazil having over 1,400 law schools and Mexico having more than 2,000. This expansion, along with rapid changes in the legal system, has raised concerns about the quality of legal education. Specifically, efforts have been made to update teaching methods, as the current approach is often seen as too theoretical, formalistic, and lacking in practical skill development.

In Brazil, the introduction of the Socratic method stands out as a significant example. This method was introduced as part of law and development initiatives backed by USAID and a few Brazilian universities in the 1970s. As noted by Grandfield in *Legal Imperialism*, this educational approach was introduced as a legal transfer from the US. While initially welcomed, it later faced resistance, and its long-term influence was limited. The problem was that the Socratic method required conditions that only a few institutions could provide: small classes, thorough student preparation, and dedicated full-time faculty. In contrast, most Brazilian law schools mainly relied on part-time faculty and a growing student body that struggled to balance work and study.

Similarly, in Mexico, despite efforts by organizations and institutions to promote student-centered approaches and case-based methods, adoption has also remained limited due to a combination of institutional and contextual factors. For example, most faculty members (many of whom are practicing lawyers and civil servants) have limited time to prepare and tend to replicate the pedagogies of their own training. Moreover, many institutions face limited resources, lack training opportunities, and have few incentives to improve teaching quality. This situation is particularly prevalent in small law schools outside major urban areas that often serve students from low-income backgrounds.

Uneven Adoption and Unequal Outcomes

An additional side effect of recent reforms is inequality across the sector. Differences in institutional contexts and access to resources have resulted in limited impact across the wider legal education sector, with only a few elite institutions with a more corporate and international focus successfully implementing new teaching methods. This uneven adoption has resulted in notable disparities in students' learning experiences. Since such reforms often demand substantial resources, faculty

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development, and institutional support, they tend to advantage students at well-funded schools, raising important questions about fairness and equity.

For instance, in Brazil, Fundação Getulio Vargas, one of the most prestigious law schools, has revamped its curricula and, in recent years, introduced a case-based model alongside specialized training in international and corporate law. In Mexico, institutions such as ITAM, Tec de Monterrey, and others have incorporated legal clinics, law & economics courses, and international learning opportunities for their students.

Recently, the gaps have widened, contributing to existing inequalities in students' educational opportunities and professional outcomes. For example, in Brazil, most institutions have historically low bar passage rates, while elite law schools consistently maintain high passage rates. Moreover, graduates from these institutions are better positioned to enter large corporate law firms or hold the most prestigious positions in the government or the private sector.

In Mexico, although there are no reliable data on the number of lawyers or the sectors they work in, some studies point to the growing stratification of the legal profession. Elite institutions prepare students for corporate areas and more global practice, and students often occupy positions in prominent transnational legal firms and corporations; other graduates occupy less prestigious jobs or do not practice law at all.

Misalignment Between Pedagogy and Professional Norms

Perhaps most importantly, beyond questions of institutional capacity, relatively little attention has been given to how pedagogical methods should be tailored to the goals of legal education in Latin America. Many innovative teaching approaches in the region are derived from common-law countries and are based on assumptions about legal reasoning, the legal system, and the lawyer's societal role that may not easily apply elsewhere. In countries such as Brazil and Mexico, doctrine and codified law are more influential than judicial opinions, which are central in common-law systems. These differences raise questions about how, when, and under what conditions pedagogical strategies from one legal tradition can be adapted to another.

Conclusion

While these examples come from the legal education sector, they offer broader lessons for higher education systems worldwide. While the international circulation of pedagogical innovations is now common across many disciplines and sectors, their adoption must be accompanied by a critical reflection on whether the pedagogy aligns with local institutional capacities, sector characteristics, and educational objectives. It is also necessary to consider how implementation may deepen existing inequalities between institutions and students. Without such reflection, the transformative potential of pedagogical innovations will remain limited and may even serve to disadvantage graduates when they enter the workforce.

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