

Stakeholder perspectives of Internationalisation of Universities in China's non-first-tier Cities: A Case Study

Authors

Lijuan LUO l.luo@napier.ac.uk

Dr Peter CRUICKSHANK p.cruickshank@napier.ac.uk

Dr Kendall RICHARDS k.richards@napier.ac.uk

Applied Informatics Subject Group, School of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Abstract

Internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) is used by a growing number of non-first-tier cities in China make their universities more globally competitive. However, we only have limited understandings about the strategies, drivers and challenges involved. This study addresses this knowledge gap through a case study focusing on a non-first-tier city in Pearl River Delta, an industrial city also in the Greater Bay Area, southern China. Analysis of interviews with 16 stakeholders from a local university reveals that in this context, internationalisation is a development strategy of higher education institutions to attract government support. The value of stakeholder analysis approach is considered, and further research directions are proposed.

1. Introduction

[Margin note: **The international context of Higher Education**]

Internationalisation of Higher Education (IoHE), as a process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global perspective into educational activities, has been a key aspect of the reform agenda not only in high-income countries but also among middle- and low-income societies (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). In order to become more globally competitive, an increasing number of Asian cities have internationalized local universities creating regional education hubs and higher-ranking university status (Mok, 2016).

China, as a developing country, has implemented an IoHE policy since 2000 (Altbach, 2009) to enhance its national competitiveness and international influence (Guo et al., 2021), in

contrast with the emphasis in Western countries on international students as a source of income generation (Guo and Guo, 2017). Moreover, past IoHE research in China has focused on the four first-tier cities and top-ranked elite research “Project 985” universities nationally (Ma & Yue, 2015; Wen & Hu, 2019; Guo et al., 2021) instead of non-first-tier cities.

[Margin note: **Stakeholders as the focus of research**]

Existing literature relating to IoHE tends to be descriptive with limited critical analysis, mostly considering national trends and political agendas. For instance, Lee & Stensaker (2021) noted that most studies focus on evaluating the macro-level such as political, economic, and social factors. They note a lack of research at the micro-level to understand the internationalisation process from the perspective of key stakeholders such as university administrators, teachers, and students.

Therefore, there is a need to explore IoHE from the perspective of key stakeholders in non-first-tier cities and non-top-ranked universities. To fill this gap, an industrial non-first-tier city in the Pearl River Delta area of southern China is an appropriate research site of this study.

[Margin note: **Case study: The university in a non-first-tier city of Pearl River Delta**]

This case study is based in a university located in a non-first-tier city of Pearl River Delta area of southern China, called PRDU here to protect its identity. PRDU was the first full time regular university in its city. From implementation of an internationalisation strategy in 2014, by 2020, PRDU had established cooperation and exchange agreements with 45 universities and research institutions from 25 countries and regions including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and Thailand. In 2017, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China permitted PRDU to establish a Sino-foreign cooperative education institution at undergraduate level, focused on Intelligent Manufacturing. Its goal was to introduce a mature engineer training system and faculties from foreign countries to train high-quality engineers with an international vision for development of the city and the economic development hub of the wider Greater Bay Region of the Pearl River Delta. PRDU also supports PhD doctoral programs with the world’s top 100 innovative universities.

PRDU actively participates in the national “Belt & Road” initiative; as a member of the “China-Latin America Joint Laboratory on Clean Energy and Climate Change”, it has reached cooperation with eight Latin American universities. It has two “Erasmus+” program exchange projects approved by the European Commission. PRDU has set up four overseas innovation centres and talent workstations in Australia, Canada, the United States and Russia. Its International College was established in 2016 and has recruited hundreds of international students from more than 35 countries with English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) program.

[Margin note: **Research aims and questions**]

This study presents an analysis of the perspectives of individual internal stakeholders on internationalisation at PRDU. It extends the current understanding of IoHE in the context of Chinese non-first-tier cities by presenting new perspectives for evaluating the opportunities, difficulties and challenges faced by stakeholders to provide recommendations for successful implementation strategies. It also considers how the process of internationalisation in this context impact stakeholders and how the stakeholders impact internationalisation process. We believe that our study addresses a research gap through its focus on Chinese non-first-tier cities and how such institutions seek equity and access to internationalisation and, in this process to build capacity.

The significance of this paper comes through being one of the first to address these issues in the context of non-first-tier cities in China, through the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the perceived importance of IoHE?

RQ2: What are the difficulties and challenges raised by IoHE?

RQ3: What is the interaction between the internationalisation process and key stakeholders, in particular the mutual impact between each other?

2. Literature Review

[Margin note: **Defining IoHE**]

IoHE has been defined in several ways. Some emphasise the academic mobility of students and faculty and the delivery of education to other countries through satellite programs (Knight, 2004; Guo & Chase, 2011; Guo et al., 2021); others focus on the integration “of an

international perspective into the teaching/learning, research and services of a higher education institution” (Knight and de Wit, cited in Taylor, 2004, p.150). Similarly, De Wit et al. (2015, p. 29) emphasise the educational drivers, defining it as:

“the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society”.

Others, such as Li & Xue (2022), emphasise sustainable development. Where IoHE is regarded as an important part of the sustainable development of higher education with the development of quality education as its core. Jaime Ndaipa et al. (2022) argue that IoHE is a policy and practice response to the global academic environment.

A related term is Internationalisation at Home (IaH), defined in a Chinese context by Yuan (2011) as utilising on campus the resources that would be on sending a minority of students and staff abroad; Yuan (2011) also noted the underuse of internationalised resources on Chinese campuses.

For this study, IoHE is defined as a process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global perspective into educational activities in a diverse world which might enhance the quality of education and research for all stakeholders by combining mobility, teaching/learning, and others. Its purpose is the development of higher education.

[Margin note: **Internationalisation in the Chinese context**]

In order to better benefit students, employers and nations, it is important to learn from non-western national and cultural contexts as well as the western ones to understand the full extent of internationalisation as a phenomenon (Jones & de Wit, 2012). When compared with a country such the USA which has driven forward globalisation, there is a tendency towards reactive or passive internationalisation in non-Western countries, whether former members of the British Empire (e.g., India, South Africa, Singapore and Malaysia), or non-English speaking countries such as Japan, Korea and China.

IoHE is still mainly based on a westernized, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm, and most scholarly and public attention has focused on the Western world over the past decades (De Wit, 2019). Generally speaking, developed countries and regions such as the USA, the UK and in the EU have been at the centre of international educational exchanges. However, since the 1990s, the international educational exchanges paid attention to developing countries (Li & Xue, 2022). In fact, some of these institutions seem to simply mimic the priorities of Anglo-Western forms of internationalisation, rather than finding distinctive forms of the concept which better reflect local needs and priorities (De Wit et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it has been argued that the trend towards enhancing regionalization and cooperation within developing countries shows a shift from the ‘copying and pasting’ of the western paradigm and the strong propensity to learn from each other (Jones and de Wit, 2014).

Recent research (e.g., Guo et al., 2021; Li & Xue, 2022) focusing on the Chinese context has made a substantial contribution to the research on IoHE just as the research has done in the American and the European context. However, these three countries/regions differ greatly in many aspects: culturally (e.g., learning beliefs); the proportion of international students; and the intensity of internationalisation in their respective higher education systems (Yemini & Sagie, 2016). For example, learning beliefs in the West and East tend to be different, and this is a crucial point since cultural beliefs about learning exert an important influence on individuals’ motivation for learning as well as actual learning and achievement (Li, 2005). Whereas the Socratic model in the west aims to find the “truth” or generate knowledge, the Confucian model in China is about moral striving (Li, 2003).

Confucius expects students to respect and obey authorities while Socrates would challenge and reveal errors (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Li (2005) also proposed mind-oriented and virtue-oriented learning to differentiate Western and Chinese learning belief. Mind-oriented learning pays attention to development of personal skills and realisation of personal goals. In contrast, virtue-oriented learning emphasises a moral tone, regarding the whole person development (Li, 2005). Therefore, internationalisation approaches and challenges here could be different from an American and European context. Even though Asia is a

geographical rather than a cultural entity (Kim, 2016), countries and regions such as Japan, Singapore, Malaysia in some extent share a common cultural tradition with China of Confucianism, placing a high priority on investment in education (Chan, 2013). They have different forms of strategies to enhance IoHE. Therefore, although internationalisation is a common goal shared by many Asian countries, the approaches used may vary considerably (Chen and Huang, 2013). It is worthwhile to investigate deeply in Chinese context.

To internationalise its higher education system, China has encouraged its universities to engage in developing transnational articulation programs with international partners (Dai, 2020). The strategies related to internationalisation in China need to focus on “soft power” and public diplomacy (Wu, 2019). Unlike developed countries such as the USA and Europe, China, as a developing country has to address the potential negative effects of student mobility, such as brain drain (Rizvi, 2005). Nevertheless, the trend of IoHE in China has been a gradual transiting from elite to common practice, from student mobility to IaH (Yuan, 2011; Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Another critical issue of internationalisation pertains to regional gaps within China and disparities between different types of universities (Liu & Liu, 2016). Previous studies on the internationalisation of universities have focused on the four first-tier cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen) or top-ranked universities such as the “Project 985” elite research universities (Ma & Yue, 2015; Guo et al., 2021) rather than the much more numerous categories of smaller universities in other cities. This study addresses this gap, by evaluating IoHE in a Chinese non-first-tier city.

[Margin note: **the drivers and challenges of IoHE in China**]

China is a latecomer of the higher education internationalisation movement led by key players in the West, but China is quickly becoming a major player in the new century with global impacts through in- and out-bound international student mobility, major international initiatives (such as the Belt and Road Initiative), and the quick ascendance of Chinese universities in major world-ranking schemes (QS, THE and ARWU) (Liu, 2021). Earlier research has shown that a leading rationale for Chinese institutions to actively engage in internationalisation is to become an integral part of the world higher education community,

to achieve international academic standards for teaching and research, and to build competitive world-class universities (Jokila, 2015; Yang, 2002). In summary, the internationalisation of universities is an important part of the sustainable development of China's higher education with the development of quality education as its core (Li&Xue,2022).

While creating new opportunities, internationalisation of higher education also has problems and challenges, including ensuring the quality and quantity of international partner higher education institutions, the risk of brain drain mentioned above, the strengthening of market orientation and the decreasing role of the state (Li & Eryong, 2022). Following Liu (2021) it is possible to model the challenges of internationalisation for China:



Figure 1 Chinese challenges in internationalisation (adapted from Liu, 2021)

[Margin note: **Stakeholders in IoHE**]

“Stakeholders” refer to those organisations, networks and private people who can influence the objectives and activities of the organisation (Kettunen, 2015; Nutt & Backoff, 1992). Stakeholder analysis can be used to generate knowledge about relevant actors to understand behavior, intentions, interrelations, agendas, interests and the influence or resources they have (Brugha & Varvasovszky, 2000).

Past research (e.g., Altbach et al., 2019; Marić, 2013) has identified the importance of understanding stakeholder perspectives, for example to evaluate the role of knowledge workers along with their human resources potential, to build a model of learning organisations that have developed the capacity to learn, adapt and change continuously, as a result of all the changes within the society. Some use it to understand the stakeholders and the nature of stakeholder management for higher education sector (e.g., Chapleo & Simms, 2010). Typical approaches in the literature to HE stakeholders are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Relevant works on stakeholder analysis

Paper	Topics & context	Focus	Internal stakeholders	Key findings
Chapleo & Simms (2010)	A case study of stakeholder analysis in higher education - A University in UK	Understanding of stakeholders and the nature of stakeholder management for universities	Students Staff (including academic and non-academic)	Three key factors affect the influence of stakeholders: student recruitment and satisfaction, financial implications and potential impact on the strategic direction.

Paper	Topics & context	Focus	Internal stakeholders	Key findings
Young & John (2013)	Stakeholders perception towards internationalization policy - Higher education in South Korea, Asia	Definition of four policy values-propriety, effectiveness, diversity and engagement	Faculty members, HE policy experts, students	1) Internationalization policy has contributed to the competitiveness of Korea university. 2) The government should consider the quality and identity of Korea higher education when designing and implementing internationalization policy.
Marić (2013)	Stakeholder analysis of higher education institutions based on literature review - University of Zagreb, a university in Croatia, Europe	The identification of critical parameters for stakeholder analysis and its implementation to higher education sector	-	1) Stakeholder analysis is a good starting point for improvement of modern higher education institution management. 2) Government, Ministry of Science and Education, National Agency and Society are the basic groups that provide performance of the core mission.
Kettunen(2015)	Stakeholder relationships in higher education - Turku University of Applied Sciences, Finland, Europe	To develop a stakeholder map to describe the most important stakeholders and the process of stakeholder relationships in higher education.	Staff Students	Stakeholders' relations are important in quality audits, and stakeholders should be involved in the development of operations.

Paper	Topics & context	Focus	Internal stakeholders	Key findings
Kumar&Aithal (2020)	Stakeholder analysis in internationalization of higher education based on secondary sources from university and higher education websites and various publications and research database	A stakeholder perspective to examine the advantages, benefits, constraints and disadvantages of internationalization.	Students University	From a stakeholder perspective, internationalization is a “planned, motivated and goal-oriented approach to attaining learning while at the same time fulfilling stakeholder interest in a mutually satisfying manner, in trans-national context”. IoHE also opened up new challenges for stakeholders (e.g., the increased cost of higher education, huge money flow to foreign countries, brain drain, challenges to work with new teams, communities and the environment.)

Following Chapleo & Simms (2010) and Kettunen (2015), the internal stakeholders chosen for this evaluation are administrative staff, academics and students (local and international), as they will have the greatest awareness of the difficulties and challenges in implementation of an IoHE strategy.

3. Research Methodology

The aim of this project is to understand the interpretation of the meanings that the key stakeholders give to their actions towards IoHE, in the Chinese context. Therefore, a constructivist and interpretivist approach is most appropriate for this study. A case study strategy enables a focus on the particularity and complexity of a single context to understand activity and its significance (Stake, 2005). As noted above, PRDU is a suitable site for two reasons. First, it is situated in a non-first-tier city in an economically important area. Second, although it is not a leading university, it actively engages in IoHE in a globalised world.

A qualitative methodology was adopted for data collection, with semi-structured interviews

allowing exploration of participant's true feelings on complex issues to be explored (Chisnall, 1992; Gomes and Gomes, 2009; Gummesson, 2005, p309). Interviews to gather different perspectives on internationalisation were conducted with 15 individuals: five administrative staff (A1-A5), two academic staff (L1, L2), students (four international students – IS1-IS4, and four local students – LS1-LS4). The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes, and all interviewees signed consent forms before the interviews took place. With the participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis in Chinese and then were translated into English. Computer-assisted data analysis software, NVivo, was used to assist the data analysis process in increasing transparency and allowing others to evaluate its level of rigor and credibility more easily. In addition, the initial findings were validated through interviews and email correspondence with a researcher from Hong Kong.

4. Results

[Margin note: **The motivation to implement internationalisation strategies**]

A difference emerges in the motivation to implement an internationalisation strategy compared to a first-tier city. Participant A1, responsible for deciding the internationalisation strategies in PRDU believes that the primary motivation for internationalisation strategy implementation the university's development. PRDU, as a regional university, may differ significantly to top-rank universities in many aspects. Firstly, A1 sees internationalisation strategies could be an effective way to improve the quality of education since internationalisation has become an important indicator for the higher education. Secondly, this city is at the forefront of economic development transformation in China, so internationalisation could be the product of the transformation integration between the university and the city. In addition, the internationalisation of the university in a way means the internationalisation of the city since the university is one of the indicators of the city quality. Last, the university aims to create the international surroundings for the teachers and students, including international communication and cross-culture awareness.

Other participants have different interpretation of the motivation of IoHE. For instance, A2, the head of International Communication Office, highlighted the importance that language

plays in internationalisation. Some strategies, such as the EMI program, could help students learn the English language better through more opportunities to practice. They believe that another benefit of cooperation with the top university abroad is to improve the international level and reputation, as well as provide teachers and students with opportunities to interact with teachers and students from top universities. A3, who is responsible for the Sino-foreign cooperative education of PRDU, believes that Sino-foreign cooperative education could be an effective way to benefit all students while taking the IaH strategies including the students who cannot afford to go abroad for further study. A4 and A5, the staff from International Communication Office, mentioned that through building up the international platform, the faculties and students broaden their vision and develop applicant-oriented ability. PRDU also has the chance to promote its reputation and show Chinese characteristics to other people from different countries. The academics, L1, L2, and the student participants all highlighted the increased opportunities brought by IoHE.

[Margin note: **The difficulties and challenges of the internationalisation process**]

IoHE at PRDU may encounter more difficulties and challenges compared with first-tier-cities. One is level of government support: A1 raised the support given by the Chinese central government to national universities, in contrast local government has responsibility for non-national universities in in non-first-tier cities. Therefore, these universities may have accessed to fewer resources and be tied up with city backgrounds and will have difficulty in establishing cooperation agreements with top-ranking international universities.

One of the difficulties and challenges that Chinese universities face is the balance between local needs and westernisation. The researcher from Hongkong raised the issue that many universities are hunting for the better ranking but ignoring research capacity and students' learning experience. He proposed that universities should focus more on how to help faculty members with research and curriculum. In addition, most universities focus on the mobility of the teachers and students by sending the teachers and students overseas. However, introducing foreign teachers and students is also important for higher education institutions, even though it is difficult for those universities in non-first-tier cities. IaH, as the strategy of

the curriculum transformation, is becoming more and more effective in benefiting higher education institutions. He also mentioned that IoHE in Asia countries should be careful about the westernisation issues.

A2 responded to the researcher's points with:

“It is a challenge not to copy the western model since we cannot deny that a big scale of models is advanced and useful. However, we believe that the strategies implementation should base on the local situation. For example, the Sino-foreign cooperative education institute should make some changes before the introduction. It is difficult, but we should take this step.”

He also stated that the main reason for the gap between the IoHE in first-tier and non-first-tier cities could be because many students at universities in non-first-tier cities do not have high grades in the *Gao Kao* college entrance examination. This could impact their level of English language and English plays an important role in internationalisation. It also becomes a challenge for the EMI program implementation in the universities of non-first-tier cities.

Sino-foreign cooperative education, as the main IaH strategy, also faces the challenge of quality assurance. A3 believes that the most important task for the next step of Sino-foreign cooperative education could be ensuring the quality of education offered to students and improving the level of talents training. The practice of quality assurance in Sino-foreign cooperative education is still in the exploratory stage and lacks a mature quality assurance system. The fundamental purpose of education is to bring fresh blood into society, that is, the quality of talents is an important indicator to measure the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education. On the other hand, the quality of education is the basic guarantee for the sustainable development of Sino-foreign cooperative education.

Another aspect noted by A4 and A5 is that the universities in non-first-tier cities are less attractive for foreigners, including the faculties and students because of the location and city background, with more challenges adapting to local cultures and situation. This especially impacts students from Europe and South America.

While talking about the difficulties and challenges, academic and student participants all

mentioned information delivery.

“It is difficult to get the information about the IoHE, and the guidance about the program is not clear, either.” A student noted.

[Margin note: **The impact of internationalisation on different key stakeholders**]

[Margin note: Administrative Staff]

The impact from and on administrative staff is obvious. A4 stated she has no “international” background in education and work. It is quite a challenging job for her, but her confidence has improved.

“When writing emails, I feel it differs from how we think. I check the email many times before I send.”

“Several months later, I feel more confident about contacting the people from various overseas universities.”

For A2, while launching the internationalisation strategies, the university should be realistic and take a step-by-step approach. One example is consideration of the benefits for the faculties and students, whether faculties had more chances to exchange ideas with those from overseas universities, including teaching or scientific research, or if students can broaden horizons by communicating with more overseas students.

A5 expressed that the awareness of internationalisation at home for the benefit of all faculties and students guided them to introduce some good curriculums model from abroad to help the transformation of the local curriculum.

[Margin note: **Academic Staff**]

Academics identified the benefits of exchange. L1, who had just come back from a University in Canada as visiting scholar highlighted the benefits of creating international links:

“thanks to the internationalisation strategies, we finally have the chance to go abroad to reach the advance research resource and communicate and share ideas with the scholars from overseas universities.”

Over one year, she exchanged ideas with many scholars in the university and integrated different teaching methods for her class at PRDU. Besides, this visit also extends her mind in her recent research.

However, there are pressures on academics. L2, who works in the Sino-foreign cooperative education institute also demonstrated the pressure to IoHE creates change teaching language to English:

“As a teacher, I can see that the developments of Sino-foreign cooperative education have gradually entered a new stage of high-level and high-quality development. It creates many more opportunities for us but also challenges. For example, I need to learn a new model of student cultivation. It might come from the cooperative partner or the model mix from two universities. My teaching language has also changed from Chinese to English. In addition, I need to communicate and cooperate with the faculties from the cooperative partner university.”

[Margin note: Students]

The embrace of different cultures such as learning beliefs greatly impacts students. LS1, who attended the exchange program in Spain, held the opinion that internationalisation did allow the students like him to go abroad to see the world and communicate with someone from another country. As far as he knew, there were many choices for exchange programs, such as Canada, Spain, and Czech Republic, including degree and non-degree programs. But he also thought there was much to improve, such as promotion. The student mentioned that he did not have much information about the program and had no idea what to do when he came up with the idea to join the program. In addition, it was difficult for him to get used to European culture when he had just got there, such as learning approaches.

“Sometimes I just so afraid to express myself and challenge others, especially the teachers.”

“As time passes, I gradually can understand them and enjoy the critiques.”

LS2, from the Sino-foreign cooperative education institute highlighted the need for a new teaching model, and the need to learn English:

“You can communicate with people from outside China and learn something different from the Chinese teaching model. But you must learn English well and be open-minded to different cultures.”

While talking about the strategies of PRDU for international talent training, LS3 thought highly that the universities introduced French education resources and a number of foreign teachers.

“It is good to make the campus more international, but as a student, I find it difficult to get used to the new teaching method and the tuition is expensive.”
“I choose this project after the college entrance examination because I can learn French at this college, which is quite new for me. It has increased my competitiveness and my language ability. Most importantly, many foreign teachers can make me feel different with the new teaching methods and humanistic features outside China.”

LS4 mentioned that PRDU also organises activities to enrich the students’ extracurricular cultural life. The Sino-foreign Student Union was established to manage students to participate in multiple activities especially cross-culture festivals. Clubs are dedicated to improving students’ interest in English learning and communication skills. In addition, PRDU has set up a study centre, which mainly provides local students with advice on studying abroad, gives advice to local students on applying for study abroad and helps students apply.

For IS1, from the EMI program, the host city is different from first-tier cities such as Shenzhen. It is not modern but cheap and still convenient. IS2 (also on the EMI programme) had no problem communicating with teachers because most of their teachers were from abroad, and the Chinese teachers also could speak good English. Still, it was not easy to connect with their Chinese classmates because of language difficulties. IS3 and IS4, from

the Chinese language program said they had no problem with communication, but sometimes just felt awkward for the cultural differences.

“I think PRDU is not international enough. There are still many areas waiting for improvement. For example, more English teaching courses can be created, and more international students could be invited to PRDU.”

5. Discussion

The interviews provide evidence of the impact of the globalisation and westernisation perspectives – with students noting the different teaching and learning style expected, and the students and lecturer showing awareness of the pressure to switch teaching language to English.

The analysis was undertaken in the framework of a case study to show the response to stakeholders to IoHE, summarised as Table 2 below:

Table 2 Stakeholder perspectives of IoHE

Group	Motivations	Difficulties	Impacts
Adminis- trative staff	Enhance the university's development; transformation integration between the university and the city; improve students' English proficiency; improve the international level and reputation; provide the teachers and students with opportunities to interact with the teachers and students from top universities	Lack of “international” background in education and work; intention to copy the western model; challenges to work with new teams, communities and the environment	feel more confident about contacting people from various overseas universities; particularly considering the benefits for the faculties and students
Academic staff	More opportunities; transformation of local curriculum	Weak information delivery; new cultivation model learning; language barrier; challenges to work with new teams, communities and the environment	Integrated different teaching methods; extended the mind in research
Students: Local	More opportunities	weak promotion; ambiguous application process; culture shock; new teaching method; high tuition fee	Culture adaptation; horizon broaden; competitiveness and language ability improved

Group	Motivations	Difficulties	Impacts
Students: Intern- ational	Cheaper than first-tier	difficult to connect with local students; lack of EMI program.	Make the campus more international; culture adaptation

It is now possible to address the research questions based on the analysis summarised in Table 2.

[Margin note: **RQ1: The perceived importance of IoHE**]

IoHE is perceived as essential in non-first-tier cities because it could introduce the transformation integration between the university and the city, enhance the university's development and the international level and reputation, improve students' English proficiency, and provide the teachers and students with opportunities to interact with the teachers and students from top universities. It could transform the local curriculum and provide lower cost for international students compared with first-tier cities.

[Margin note: **RQ2: The difficulties and challenges raised by IoHE**]

The main difficulties and challenges seen are that the administrative staffs are lack of “international” background in education and work, and they hold the intention to copy the western model. It is challengeable for them and the academics to work with new teams, communities and the environment. The academics and local students complain the efficiency of information delivery and new teaching method. What's more, the academics are struggling with language barrier while local students are fighting for ambiguous application process, culture shock and high tuition fee. For international students, it is difficult to connect with local students and there is lack of EMI program.

As a matter of fact, it provides evidence for many of the issues summarised from Liu (2021) in Table 2.

[Margin note: **RQ3: Mutual impact of the internationalisation process and key stakeholders**]

The study has provided evidence of the mutual interaction between key stakeholders and the internationalisation process. On the one hand, as a result of IoHE, the stakeholders feel more confident about contacting people from various overseas universities and exchange the mind in research. In addition, the internationalisation process is seen as helping the stakeholders

adapt to different cultures, improving their competitiveness and language ability. at the same time, it has broadened their horizon, making the campus more international for stakeholders. On the other hand, the internationalisation process has led to consideration of the benefits for the faculties and students, and uptake of different teaching methods.

[Margin note: **Wider implications**]

This study also highlighted the importance of cultural aspects which are impacting the approach to teaching and learning of local and international students, and academic staff. One example is the change to a Socratic/questioning mode of learning which was noted by at least one student, with no regret expressed of the loss of Confucian/authority-respecting mode of learning (Li, 2003; Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

Additionally, there is little evidence from the stakeholders of resistance to westernisation of a desire to explicitly retain ‘Chinese’ values in HE (Mok, 2007) – with more on the convenience of communicating in English (Altbach, 2022), and no evidence about the hostility from international academic environment.

This analysis has brought to light the role of key internal stakeholders that affect or being affected by the IoHE implementation, indicated the nature of difficulties and challenges which has to be addressed to enhance the IoHE implementation.

The evidence also shows that the new trend of IoHE has been switched from student mobility to IaH.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the focus is not on the policy (e.g., Young & John, 2013), and not the secondary data (e.g., Kumar & Aithal, 2020), but the empirical research on the perspective of stakeholders. This has allowed the identification of the practical drivers, difficulties and challenges that they face, and the impacts of these from stakeholders and on stakeholders. The study has provided a novel account of the emergence of IoHE from the active participation of stakeholders. It has shown that IoHE is closely linked to the broader education strategy of this non-first-tier university. It has considered the strategies and

activities that have developed, and how the process of internationalisation in this context has been managed and led.

This study has addressed a research gap in the difficulties and challenges of stakeholder analysis in IoHE through its focus on Chinese non-first-tier cities. It has shown how such institutions seek equity and access to internationalisation and, in this process to build capacity.

[Margin note: **Practitioner recommendations**]

Some stakeholder recommendations emerge from the findings. First, the core groups (Government, Ministry of Science and Education, National Agency and Society) that provide performance of the core mission (Marić, 2013) could better establish the higher education governance model for internationalisation, helping universities like PRDU to better implement the strategies.

For Asian countries, the introduction of advanced education resources should consider its international and intercultural dimensions and be in accordance with their developmental needs and local situation. Support from local government is important and could be one of the most serious challenges to improving the relations between the government and university (Trilokekar, 2010). Unlike the universities in first-tier cities, the IoHE in non-first-tier cities will focus more on the city background, meaning that IoHE and is inseparable from city development. The city's supporting facilities are also key to attracting international talents.

Therefore, we should continuously stimulate the key stakeholders to participate for IoHE.

[Margin note: **Research implications and further work**]

This study contributes on the theories of exploring the difficulties and challenges of IoHE by the stakeholder analysis in empirical studies, and has made a contribution to filling the research gap through its focus on the context of non-first-tier cities in China. It has highlighted the mutual impact between the internationalisation process and stakeholders.

Some limitations are acknowledged. For instance, only a limit range of stakeholder

perspectives could be analysed. Future studies could develop the findings here through including a wider range of stakeholders, and universities in different areas of China (such as the north). Similarly, the different levels of involvement by different stakeholders could be taken into account.

Based on the findings presented here, future work could develop an explanatory framework for analysing how the stakeholder work together to learn through resolution of conflicts and contradictions, further developing a model of IoHE or IaH in a Chinese context.

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