

*Internationalisation-at-Home in Chinese Universities:
Contradictions and Potential Changes*

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Abstract

Internationalisation at Home (IaH) is a new trend in Internationalisation of Higher Education (IoHE). Starting with China's emergence as a major international education player, the study evaluates the student experience of IaH in two Chinese higher education institutions, exploring the underlying values, purposes, and approaches. Two qualitative case studies were conducted, with 29 semi-structured student interviews. They were analysed through the lens of Activity Theory to identify the contradictions driving change. The analysis reveals that students perceive IaH as a driver for education reform, including curriculum transformation, student and academic development, income generation enhancement, university reputation improvement, and inclusive education. Activity Theory is shown to have enabled the identification of contradictions. These include the tension between personal development expectations and industrial needs, the superficial nature of IaH implementation when restricted to specific departments like an International Office/School, differing cultural and educational expectations and practices, and the role of traditional practices in blocking the reform process. These contradictions illustrate the complex interactions between student aspirations, institutional strategies, and the broader educational and industrial landscape. The Activity Theory framework demonstrates key social-cultural and contextual elements central to education reform. It identifies considerations in implementation of IaH strategies. This is the first use of Activity Theory to evaluate the relationship in IaH between higher education reform, goal setting, social and cultural norms, industrial expectations and internal roles and responsibilities. The research has generated new understandings of how IaH can be extended to other developing countries.

Keywords: Internationalisation at Home (IaH), China; Activity Theory, Higher Education, Educational Reform and Development, Internationalisation of Higher Education (IoHE)

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Introduction

Internationalisation has come to be seen as a key change agent in tertiary education, in high-income societies but also among middle- and low-income ones (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jones & de Wit, 2012). Internationalisation has varying socio-economic, cultural, and technological impacts depending on context (Maringe et al., 2013), as well as political, economic, social-cultural, and academic rationales (de Wit, 2002).

The focus of Internationalisation of Higher Education (IoHE) has historically been on “internationalisation abroad”: the small subset of students who can take advantage of international mobility (de Wit, 2020). Internationalisation at Home (IaH) is new trend in response to the need to ensure that domestic students can receive an international higher education experience even if they do not study abroad (Harrison, 2015). The term can be defined as “purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p76). This has become increasingly important, as restrictions are placed on mobility, certainly after the COVID-19 pandemic (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), but also through the impact of the sustainability agenda. Much of the existing research on IaH has taken place in North America (e.g. Agnew & Kahn, 2014; Soria & Troisi, 2014) and Europe (e.g. Almeida et al., 2019; Robson et al., 2018). Insufficient attention has been paid to developing countries and Asian contexts, especially China, where IaH has grown rapidly (Guo et al., 2022). It is therefore of value to extend the current discourse to include this perspective.

China is suitable for this study because it exemplifies one of the most effective models of internationalisation of education in developing countries, with an increasing international reputation (Harrison, 2015). The development of contemporary Chinese higher education has been significantly influenced by internationalisation (Xu, 2023). Even though the prevalent definition of internationalisation uses Western discourses and attempts, China has unique characteristics in this area (Xu, 2023). Its success is evident in its ability to attract foreign professors, educators, and students from various countries (Harrison, 2015). Liu (2021) effectively encapsulates these points, drawing from interviews with professionals engaged in internationalisation in China. Liu presents a Chinese perspective on internationalisation in higher education as a coordinated national effort, integrated at the institutional level, aimed at adopting Western-led global standards in teaching, research, management, and facility development. This is achieved by exposing academic staff, students, and administrative staffs to Western practices. An increasing number of Chinese higher education institutions and projects have established “Sino-foreign cooperative education” institutes. These educational initiatives are jointly organised by foreign and Chinese educational institutions in China, with a primary focus on enrolling Chinese students (Zhang, 2023).

Academic and disciplinary structures shape the approach to internationalisation in distinct ways (Alexiadou et al., 2024). Internationally (Cannon & Djajanegara, 1997), the “hard” (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)) sciences usually attain higher levels of internationalisation than “soft” subjects (i.e. humanities and social sciences). For internationalisation, “Hard” sciences focus on technology development and research and knowledge base reinforcement, while “soft” sciences focus more for enhancing critical thinking and deliberation (Alexiadou et al., 2024). This study mainly focusses on STEM discipline.

In order to understand the factors driving and inhibiting the development of IaH in this context, this research evaluates IaH in two Chinese higher education institutions, exploring the perceptions of students, through the following research questions:

Q1: How are the perceptions of Internationalisation at Home in Chinese higher institution?

Q2: What are the contradictions and changes that occur as IaH is implemented?

Method

A qualitative methodology was adopted for this study, with 29 semi-structured interviews allowing exploration of participant's true feelings on complex issues to be explored (Gummesson, 2005).

The study consisted of two case studies in PRDU and GXPU. Both PRDU and GXPU are Universities located in non-first-tier cities which focus on STEM subjects, expanding their international presence and educational capacities through IaH. However, they have distinct characteristics and strategic focuses. PRDU benefits from being in a major economic hub, likely offering greater opportunities for students in industrial and economic sectors post-graduation. GXPU is located in a more rural area but is still in an industrial town. Both universities are keen to internationalise their campuses and have included Sino-foreign cooperative education, but PRDU has established a dedicated school. The choice of these two allows different perspectives to be examined by contrasting the city and economic background.

Interviews were held via WeChat voice calls due to the preference of participants. The interviews were conducted in either Chinese or English, depending on the participants' preference, to ensure they felt comfortable expressing their thoughts clearly in the language of their choice. 28 local participants chose to speak Chinese while one international student participant chose English. Participants were named as PR1, PR2 ... and GX1, GX2 ... for anonymity and confidentiality. This study adopted thematic analysis (TA) using NVIVO 14 on the English translations of the Chinese transcriptions.

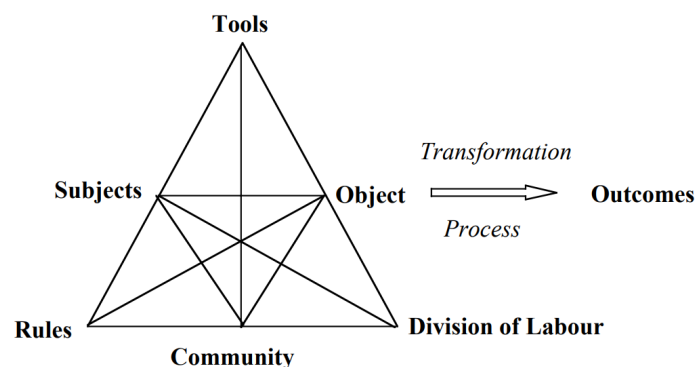


Figure 1: Activity System (Engeström, 1987)

An Activity Theory framework was used to interpret the data. The *Eight-Step-Model* (Mwanza, 2001) was used, incorporating open-ended questions to generate and interpret the components of the AT based on the grounded theory.

Table 1: Eight-Step-Model (Mwanza, 2001)

AT Components	Identification
Activity of interest	What sort of activity am I interested in?
<i>Object</i> or <i>Objective</i> of activity	Why is this activity taking place?
<i>Subjects</i> in this activity	Who is involved in carrying out this activity?
<i>Tools</i> mediating the activity	By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity?
<i>Rules</i> and regulations mediating the activity	Are there any cultural norms, rules or regulations governing the performance of this activity?
<i>Division of labour</i> mediating the activity	Who is responsible for what, when carrying out this activity and how are the roles organised?
<i>Community</i> in which activity is conducted	What is the environment in which this activity is carried out?
<i>Expected outcome</i>	What is the desired Outcome from carrying out this activity?

The questions posed by Mwanza (2001) especially the how's as follows will be used to assist in identifying contradictions within the activity system.

- What *Tools* does the *Subjects* use to achieve their *Objective* and how?
- What *Rules* affect the way the *Subjects* achieve the *Objective* and how?
- How does the *Division of Labour* influence the way the *Subjects* satisfy their *Objective*?
- How do the *Tools* in use affect the way the *Community* achieves the *Objective*?
- What *Rules* affect the way the *Community* satisfies their *Objective* and how?
- How does the *Division of Labour* affect the way the *Community* achieves the *Objective*?

Examples based on themes of subjects (students) are listed in Fig. 2. The figure illustrates how the data was reduced to generate the key themes for each of the six components of Activity Theory.

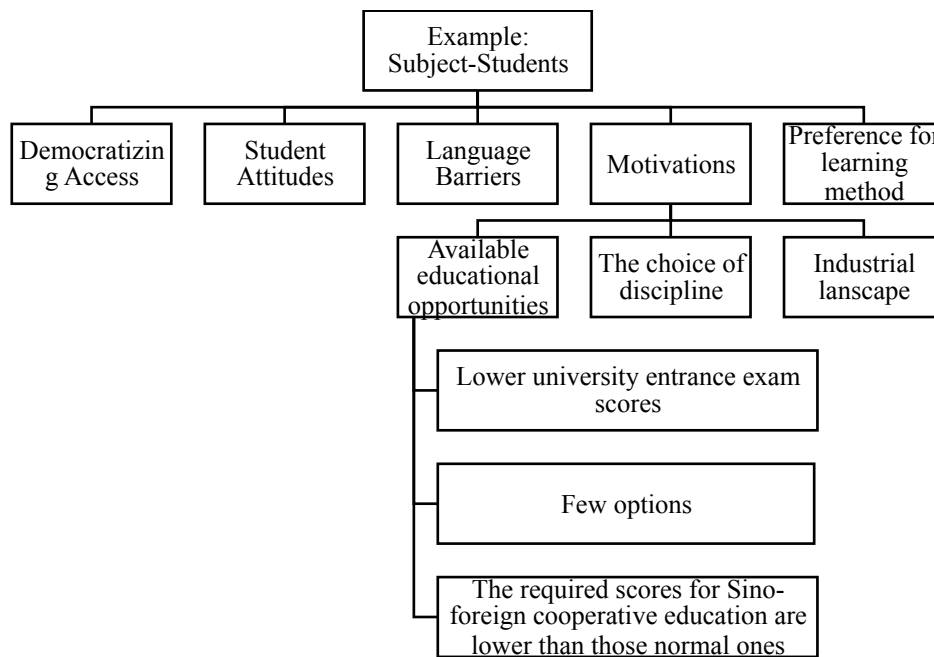


Figure 2: Coding Process and Examples (Bottom-Up Approach Based on Grounded Theory)

Results and Discussion

Perceptions of IaH

The interpretation of nodes found in this study helps to answer RQ1: “what are the perceptions of IaH”. The developed model is (Figure 2) (The lines (both black and blue) represent potential secondary contradictions).

Participants across both datasets identified four key expected outcomes/purposes of this initiative: curriculum transformation, student development, academic development, and improvements in income generation and university reputation.

“In traditional class, the teacher may focus more on the teaching of theory and writing on the blackboard to answer questions about the coursework, but in the class of a teacher with overseas experiences, he may guide us to learn, and then teach us to solve problems by ourselves, including information retrieval and software learning.” (GX2)

“The university expects us to broaden our global vision by involving international activities.” (PR3)

“The teachers with overseas background will be more open-minded and casual. They will expand the knowledge and guide us to think.” (PR11)

“There is no doubt that the Sino-foreign cooperative education exists for the profit.” (PR2)

GX8 hold the opinion that it would help raise the university’s voice in the world, while GX15 thought the international collaboration experiences would enhance their management skills and improve the ranking. GX9 mentioned that introduction of international students could be

one indicator to improve the international reputation, because the scale of international students was counted in university rankings.

Additionally, participants from the GXPU dataset emphasise the importance of education equity, attributing this priority to the distinctive background of their city. This group placed significant emphasis on local characteristics and needs when implementing IaH strategies, indicating a tailored approach to internationalisation efforts that aligns with the specific context of their environment.

“For individual students, because the ways to gain knowledge and understand the world are more diverse, it will narrow the gap of information and resources between us and students from top universities or big cities.” (GX13)

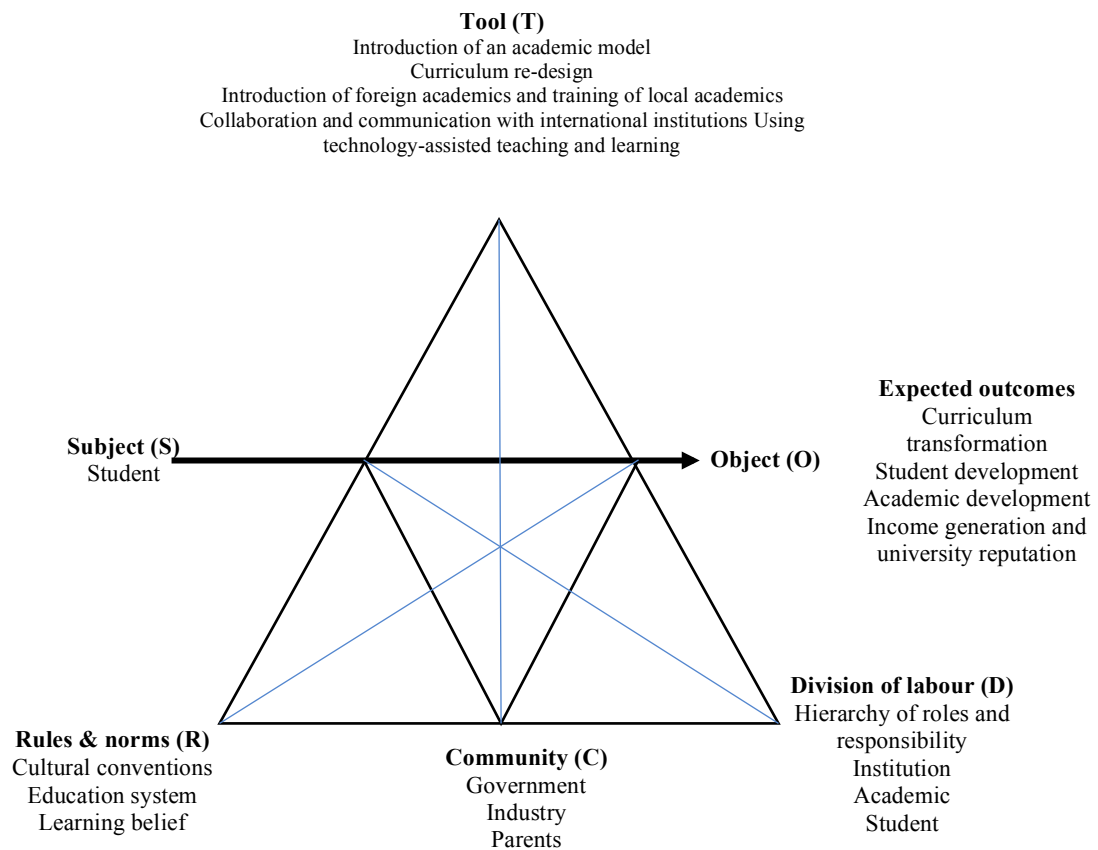


Figure 3: The Development Model Based on the Interpretations of Findings Into Nodes

The data shows that, in this context, internationalisation is interpreted to mean incorporating western models of higher education through adopting its criteria and practice (Wang et al., 2020) such as Sino-foreign education. This also aligns with the findings of Liu (2021). However, the data also shows the Chinese universities have awareness of the balance between local needs and westernisation. For example, the emphasis on adapting the strategy to "the actual conditions of the city" which recognises that Chinese cities vary greatly in terms of economic capabilities, educational infrastructure, cultural contexts, and existing international links. These findings extend the knowledge to the previous perceptions that

some developing countries may easily simply mimic the priorities of Anglo-Western forms of internationalisation (de Wit et al., 2019).

The findings show that implementation of an internationalisation strategy improves students' English proficiency, but they are still struggling for the language competency. This is not an issue in a westernized, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm (Galloway, Numajiri & Rees, 2020). However, this greatly impacts the internationalisation progress in a non-native English-speaking country, where English proficiency is a challenge teachers and students. Furthermore, the data shows that teachers and students would have more opportunities to interact with the teachers and students from western practices aligned with Liu (2021).

Nevertheless, the findings show an increasing awareness of internationalisation, benefiting faculties and students without mobility, through the introduction of good curriculums model from abroad to help the transformation of the local curriculum. This provides a model of a trend of internationalisation in China of a gradual transiting from elite to common practice, from mobility to IaH (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). As identified in this study, IaH has potential democratise the benefits of internationalisation to a wider segment of society (Harrison, 2015), including those who cannot afford to study abroad (Beelen and Jones, 2015). It allows students to stay on campus, broaden their knowledge of the world, and develop the awareness and skills needed to become global citizens. Establishing internationalised campuses is a key method for achieving 'local internationalisation' (Liu et al., 2020).

Contradictions and Changes That Occur As IaH Is Implemented

Another significant finding of research is its exploration of the contradictions to answer second research questions, which is related to *the tools* (international academic models) and the *rules* (traditional education methods), especially how *Tools, Rules and norms* and *Division of labour* as mediator influences the way that the actors (*Subject, Community*) achieve the *objective*. Based on the findings, every component in the AT model in this study is interconnected and mediates the learning process consistent with Engeström (1987).

This study reveals several contradictions. These include the struggle between maintaining large, traditional, teacher-centred classrooms and adopting student-centred learning environments that foster individual attention.

“It is about fifty to sixty students in one class I attended before. But in the university (Sino-foreign School), there is small size class, so I feel like being noticed by teachers.” (PR6)

“I felt that the biggest problem was adaptability. That is, if you want to implement IaH, you need to change the traditional teaching method which had been taught from primary school.” (GX12)

“They've been taught to be respectful to others, especially when the elders or someone else is talking, you have to be quiet, you cannot disturb them.” (PR4)

And the reliance on memorisation-based assessment methods which do not align with the demand for practical, industry-relevant skills; and the outdated curriculum, which fails to keep pace with advancements in technology like AI and robotics.

“Technology of software such as Java update very quick, and the learning modules cannot catch up with the updated speed. On the contrary, the outdated ones still be taught. The students may just simply go through the books and memorise them a month before the final exam, they may pass the exam. But it did not mean that they have mastered core aspects of the technology because they might not get a chance to operate it.” (PR14)

Furthermore, while internationalisation brings foreign academic models and curricula, the process is restricted by limited faculty training, language barriers, and uneven access to international resources, all of which contribute to superficial or inconsistent implementation of IaH across different regions.

“The international projects require us to use the English as media instruction (EMI), this is a big challenge for us from this level of university.” (GX6)

Both GX12 and PR9 express concerns over the scarcity of academics with international experience and the frequent changes among introducing academics. although not explicitly mentioned by the participants, the effectiveness of online learning and international collaboration is contingent on the availability of reliable internet access and digital tools. The digital divide can exacerbate educational inequalities, particularly affecting students from regions with limited technological infrastructure.

These issues are exacerbated by the shortage of qualified teachers, logistical challenges, less government support, and the digital divide, which makes international education less effective in some areas. The detail contradictions listed as *Tools* related, *Rules and norms* related, and *Division of Labour* related as table 2, table 3 and table 4 as follows.

Table 2: Contradictions Related to Tools

Traditional practices	Changes and developments	Sub-Activity triangle focused on
Large class and less individualised approach	Small class and individual focus	Subject-Tool-Object
Assessment over-focus on written test (exam) and memorisation	The assessments focus on practical skills	<u>Division of labour-Tool-Object</u> Community-Tool-Object
Outdated teaching content	Novel and internationalised curriculum	Subject-Tool-Object
Local academics only	Foreign academics and locally trained academics with overseas experience	Community-Tool-Object
Unaffordable	Democratising access	<u>Division of labour-Tool-Object</u> Subject-Tool-Object
Low competency of English and cross-cultural skills	Higher exposure and competency of English and cross-cultural skills	Subject-Tool-Object

Table 3: Contradictions Related to Rules & Norms

Traditional practices	Changes and developments	Sub-Activity triangle focused on
No understanding religious belief	More understanding of religious belief to prevent conflicts	Subject- Rules & norms -Object
More collectivism	More individualism	<u>Division of labour- Rules & norms -Object</u>
Teacher-centred approach/Confucian learning belief	Student-centred approach/Critical thinking	Subject- Rules & norms -Object

Table 4: Contradictions Related to Division of Labour

Traditional practices	Changes and developments	Sub-Activity triangle focused on
Disconnect with current industrial needs	Introduction of up-to-date and relevant skills	Community-Division of labour- Object
Lack of resources and support	More accessible resources and support	Community- Division of labour - Object
Low awareness of IaH among academics and institution	More understanding of IaH	Subject-Division of labour- Object
Teachers take on parenting role	Students tend to be more autonomy	Subject-Division of labour- Object

Following Mwanza (2001), the “object” is the focus of activity, two actor nodes (*Subject* and *Community*) are mediated by *Tools, Rules and norms* and *Division of labour*. However, the *Division of labour* could also be mediated by *Tools* and *Rules and norms* in this study, because in the IaH activity system, the roles and responsibilities represented by human beings rather than a computer system in computerised area. The findings identified that the relationship between *Division of labour* and *Object* is mediated by *Tools* and *Rules and norms*.

Conclusion

Significance

This study provides a theory-based qualitative investigation of the experiences of STEM students of IaH in Chinese universities. By focusing on a non-Western context, it contributes to a more complete understanding of internationalisation and offering new insights that can benefit students, employers, and nations, especially since IaH has traditionally concentrated on Western countries.

This is the first example in the available literature of an application of AT in the field of IoHE. AT has served as a valuable framework for analysing the systemic contradictions that arise when IaH is implemented in a traditional educational setting. It has helped elucidate how different components of the educational system interact and conflict, and how these contradictions can act as driver to foster educational transformation. One significant insight

arises from the exploration of the contradictions related to the *tools, rules and norms* and *division of labour*, especially how *tools* and *rules and norms* and *division of labour* as mediator influences the way that the actors (*subject, community*) achieve their objective. AT has helped frame these contradictions, showing how the introduction of new tools and methods disrupts established systems, causing tensions that need to be addressed for successful integration. One example is the students as *subject* mediated by introduction of academic model with small class and individual focus as *tools*, which cause the contradictions with traditional practices like large class and less individualised approach.

Unique to this study lies an application of Mwanza (2001)'s activity system framework within the IaH context, specifically regarding human-centred roles rather than automated systems typical in computer design. By identifying that the *division of labour* is mediated by *tools* and *rules and norms* in a way unique to human actors, the study extends the understanding of how activity systems can operate within non-computerised environments. This adjustment provides a nuanced insight into the IaH framework, highlighting the complexity of human roles and responsibilities within institutional structures and suggesting that the *division of labour* can influence the *object* through varied mediations, not solely reliant on automated or procedural methods. This demonstrates that the *division of labour, tools, and rules & norms* can interconnect dynamically with *object* in the IaH context, extending the AT framework's application understanding to education and social environments.

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