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Internationalization of Higher Education and Emerging National Rationales: Comparative Analysis of the Global North and South

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Abstract

This paper provides a comparative analysis of national rationales to higher education internationalization in the global north and south countries using content analysis. The results reveal that the socio-economic rationales are dominant across most of the 27 sampled countries. However, they manifest differently across the global north and global south as countries interpret the benefits and effects of internationalization in line with their national priorities. These variations are being shaped by an increasingly complex, competitive, and multipolar higher education internationalization landscape with new global south actors acquiring agency despite the deepening global inequalities. As a result, political rationales are becoming an important driver to internationalization. The current geopolitical environment associated with global conflicts, health pandemics, and increased nationalistic, anti-immigrant, and anti-globalization sentiments is also adding more uncertainty and complexity. Due to increased concerns about this multipolar and self-centred internationalization, a few countries are starting to promote inclusive approaches to internationalization.

Keywords Higher education · Internationalization · Rationales · Global north · Global south

Introduction

During the past three decades, higher education internationalization (HEI) has emerged as a critical factor shaping higher education. However, the concept is still a westernized, and Anglo-Saxon paradigm (Jones and De Wit 2012; Van der Wende 2001; Valcke 2020). Limited studies have researched and conceptualized internationalization within paradigms shaped by global south experiences (Majee and Ress

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2018, 4; Sehoole et al. 2024). Furthermore, recent studies which have explored rationales to internationalization have either only focused on specific regions and countries (e.g. De Wit et al. 2015; Li et al 2023) or higher education institutions (e.g. Mäkinen 2023; Seeber et al 2016). Therefore, there is a research gap on the rationales to HEI across geographical regions. This paper responds to this gap by performing a content analysis of 366 policy documents in 27 global north and global south countries—building on the conceptual work of De Wit, Knight, and others (Crăciun 2018; De Wit and Altbach 2021; Knight 2004a, 2012, 2015; Wihlborg and Robson 2018). In doing so, the paper responds to this overarching question: What are the main rationales for higher education internationalization between the global north and the global south countries?

Rationales, particularly those at the national level must be understood because they shape national policies and institutional approaches relating to a country's sociopolitical, cultural, and economic context. To build on existing national-level studies on rationales to HEI (Li et al 2023; Teferra 2014; Theiler 2015; Yonezawa 2018), this study provides a comparative lens by focusing on the global north and global south—geographical regions which often have varying socio-cultural and economic contexts. This provides new insights given the current developments in internationalization in which new actors are acquiring agency and competing with the traditionally dominant nation-state actors in the global north (Bamberger and Morris 2023).

The comparison of rationales across different geographical regions is imperative in HEI discourse given the potential implications of ongoing global disruptions. These include Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, realignment of national interest resulting in wars, and increased nationalistic, anti-immigrant, anti-liberal, and anti-globalism sentiments (Hawkins 2017; Mäkinen 2023; Mok et al. 2020). These disruptions have amplified complexities linked to the current multipolar world whilst distorting and reframing HEI rationales (Mulvey 2022; Stein, 2021a, b).

The Global North and Global South Divide

The concepts of "Global North" and "Global South" have become popular meta-categories for framing research since they emerged in the 1970s and gained prominence in the "Brandt Report" which sought to capture global inequalities in terms of a North–South divide (Brandt 1980). As a meta-category in the analysis of world politics, the "North" correlates with nation-states in North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and some parts of Asia that have historically been defined as "the West", "rich", "developed", and "first world" due to perceptions of their relative wealth and global dominance (Odeh 2010). On the other hand, the "South" has been used to describe countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia and Oceania—regions often characterized as "poor", "developing", "third world", and synonymous with "uncertain development, unorthodox economies, failed states, nations fraught with corruption, poverty, and strife" (Comaroff and Cormaroff 2012, p. 113; Haug et al. 2021).

The qualifier "Global" as an add-on to the "North" and "South" has served to underline the increasing interconnectedness of social relations between geographical

locations in a globalized context (Comaroff and Cormaroff 2012; Riggs 2007). In this context, the "Global South" has evolved to stand for different sets of cross-regional and multicultural alliances such as BRICS mostly comprising of formerly colonized countries challenging the dominance and structural privilege of "northern" states (Gosovic 2016; Kaul 2013). On the other hand, the "Global North" is usually taken to refer to concrete sets of hegemonic states such as "traditional donors" or "industrialized economies" that "dominate social structures through economic flows, powerful forms of meaning-making and/or explicit coercive measures" (Haug et al. 2021, p. 1929).

Several authors have highlighted the limitations of using this binary North–South dichotomy for the analysis of world politics (for example, Horner 2020; Sabzalieva et al. 2020). The authors argue that these "Global North" and "Global South" meta-categories often contain simplistic classifications that do not account for complexity. For example, Cooper (2021) analysis of Chinese experiences has revealed that binary divisions between "North" and "South" or "developed" and "developing" have less relevance. Braff and Nelson (2022) also argued that the "Global North" is not monolithic as the societies are internally stratified and diverse, so not everyone in the Global North is rich and powerful.

Nevertheless, the potential of the "Global North" and "Global South" meta-categories consist of "a necessary reduction of complexity, as well as point to empirical patterns that require more detailed attention" (Haug et al. 2021, p. 1933). As such, the "Global North" and "Global South" classification is helpful as an imprecise but useful relational category to understand the evolving and overlapping engagements in higher education internationalization.

Rationales for Higher Education Internationalization

Extant research has shown that rationales for higher education internationalization have shifted in recent decades from cooperative efforts anchored by political, cultural, and academic arguments towards economically motivated rationales (De Wit and Altbach 2021; Wihlborg and Robson 2018). The complexities associated with a changing global order confounded with global competition, geopolitical, and socio-ecological crisis is also shaping the rationales to HEI. Below is a discussion on categories linked to these rationales and the associated complexities.

Economic Rationales

De Wit and Altbach (2021) have shown that economic rationales are mostly driven by competition which is often associated with globalization. With English becoming the "*lingua franca*" in higher education, competition is often connected to Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK, Australia, and New Zealand which have commodified higher education and are able to attract more fee-paying international students (Tight 2021).

Within the context of policies promoting competitiveness, a distinction can be made between those focused on improving the competitiveness of the national higher education system (e.g. EU countries) and those perceived as major contributors to the successful performance of the national economy as whole (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan, Israel, and Norway) (Crăciun 2018). Several East Asian countries launched "excellence" initiatives, for example, the "Brain Korea 21" in South Korea (Jang et al. 2016), and the "985" project in China (Kim et al. 2018) focused on enhancing the competitiveness the higher education system. On the other hand, countries such as Taiwan focus their internationalization policies to balance global ambition, address local needs, and drive the notion of knowledge-based economies (Lo and Hou 2020).

Socio-cultural Rationales

Whilst economic drivers seem to be the main driver for internationalization policies, there is evidence that cooperation still plays a significant role within this policy arena. According to Reilly and Sweeney (2021), most continental European countries pursue a cooperative approach because of the political and value-based systems which promote free access to higher education as an established right.

In many former colonial states, research by Teferra (2014) also shows that internationalization policies are sometimes shaped by development cooperation with European countries based on historical, cultural, and linguistic links. Similar policies anchored by development cooperation are evident in Central and Eastern European countries considering their relationship with EU countries during their entry into the European Union (Dobbins and Kwiek 2017).

Critiques of the current internationalization steering mechanisms focused on economic and competitive rationales have also highlighted how the process continually rewards institutions in the global north—exacerbating inequality (Leask and de Gayardon 2021). As a result, the emerging literature on concepts such as "Internationalization in Higher Education for Society" (IHES) has analysed policies promoting comprehensive and inclusive visions of internationalization that systematically and strategically extend its benefits into local communities (see, Brandenburg et al 2020). As an example, Tran and Bui (2021) study on Australia's New Colombo Plan shows how the initiative has been able to catalyse socio-economic impact in host communities through strengthening bilateral ties and fostering multisectoral partnerships.

Academic Rationales

Internationalization policies have also been useful to ensure or improve the quality of higher education. Studies by Alsharari (2018) in the UAE, and Bordean and Borza (2013) in Romania reveal how internationalization policies and mobility programmes have been instrumental in improving the quality of degree programmes. A case study analysis in Vietnam by Hoang et al (2018) revealed

that the internationalization policy led to the diversification of the institutions, programmes, activities, and curricula to the benefit of students.

According to Klemenčič (2019), curriculum reform which drove the Bologna process also aimed to reflect and enhance the professional relevance of study programmes in Europe to make higher education more responsive to the needs of industry and society. "Policy travel" of the Bologna process is not only improving the quality of education but also facilitating regional integration (Woldegiorgis 2018). For example, the African Union Higher Education Harmonization Strategy which is aligned to the Bologna process is facilitating an integrated knowledge system that strengthens collaboration between African institutions and informs socio-economic development in the region (Alemu 2018; Woldegiorgis 2018). Critiques of higher education integration have highlighted some challenges related to the impact of the structural changes, and social impact (see Wihlborg 2019; Wihlborg and Teelken 2014).

Political Rationales

The increased desire to utilize internationalization as a tool for the development of human capital required for national development and global competitiveness has also led policymakers in some countries, to "exercise detailed controls over programme contents, personnel management, and research" (Marginson 2011, p. 595). Hammond (2016) found this strong nation-state steering and control of education to be a key commonality of policies in China. In such instances, internationalization is used as a political tool to inculcate national identities aimed at legitimatization and institutionalization of political arrangements of state governance (Tight 2022).

Emerging economies such as India, China, and Russia have also partly shaped their internationalization policies to pursue greater global south cooperation anchored in pre-colonial arrangements. Research by Leal and Moraes (2018) revealed how the Undergraduate Student Agreement Program (PEC-G) in Brazil, institutionalized in the 1960s, and aimed at providing students from developing countries with an opportunity to study at Brazilian universities has evolved to become an important tool to promote south–south cooperation.

The increased policy orientation towards global south cooperation is aligned with literature on decolonization in higher education challenging the north–south unidirectional flow of knowledge and ideas which perpetuates the dominance of Western cultures (Tight 2024). In their analysis of the internationalization agenda in Zimbabwe, Thondhlana et al. (2021) argue that internationalization has a transformational element that seeks to contain decolonizing effects reflected in the curriculum redesign and indigenization. Critiques of this decolonization literature have emerged arguing that this postcolonial framing adopts a bipolar view of geopolitics which does not account for the complex and multipolar geopolitical context (Bamberger and Morris 2023; Stein 2021b; Mulvey 2022).

Complexities Influencing HEI Steering Mechanisms

The realigning of national interests in the global south which are also evident in the global north as evidenced by US-led alliances' opposition to Chinese and Russian global machinations has reshaped the rationales to HEI in recent years (Mäkinen 2023). This has been compounded by recent developments, such as rising nationalism, the COVID-19 pandemic, technological disruptions, and different conflicts. In Europe the cultural shifts away from liberal and cooperation values have led to limits in academic freedoms associated with HEI, whilst Brexit has weakened collaboration between UK and EU researchers (Highman et al 2023). In the case of Russia, its aggressive and isolationist foreign policy has led to the country increasingly becoming "de-internationalized" (Kuzminov and Yudkeivich 2022).

In the global south, the complexity is linked to the shifting trends in international student mobility where China, Malaysia, and Eastern European countries are increasingly enroling more international students—acquiring more agency in the process (UNESCO Institute of Statistics UIS 2023). The anti-globalism, anti-immigration, and nationalist sentiments in many developed countries are interconnected to this increased agency of global south countries (De Wit and Altbach 2021; Rizvi et al. 2022). The HEI impacts of these contestations are illustrated by Hawkins' (2017) study which showed that as US students increasingly embrace nationalist and anti-globalism sentiments, they have become less interested in studying abroad, with only 10% of all undergraduate students having an international learning experience.

Methodology

To investigate the varying rationales for higher education internationalization policies, this study utilizes a content analysis method comparing 366 policy documents in 27 global north and the global south countries (Fig. 1). Rationales in this context are defined as "motivations for integrating an international dimension into higher education policy" (De Wit 2022, p. 84). Content analysis was identified as an ideal research technique for this study because it enabled the researchers to objectively quantify the interpretation of the motivations of policymakers (Berg 2001; Kripendorff 2004).
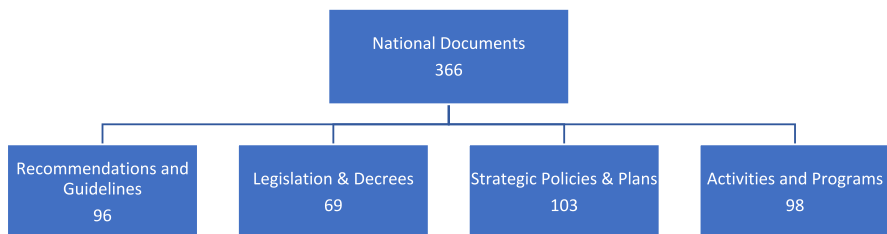

Fig. 1 Overview of collected national documents from the 27 selected countries

Sampling of Countries for Analysis

The study utilized the UNCTAD country economic and geographical classifications to select the representative global north and global south countries for analysis. Through these classifications, developed countries are categorized as the global north, whilst developing countries are categorized as the global south (Hoffmeister 2020). Developed economies broadly comprise Northern America, Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The developing economies broadly comprise Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia without Israel, Japan, and South Korea, and Oceania without Australia, and New Zealand.

The limitation of this classification is that there are countries in certain geographical areas which do not correspond with their designation as developed or developing. For example, Mexico and Cuba are geographically located in North America, but are not considered developed. As a result, for this study, Mexico and Cuba are designated as part of Latin America and the Caribbean which is a "developing"/global south region. Furthermore, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand do not fit into the "developing" country classification in Asia and Oceania. Therefore, they are grouped with China which as the second largest economy in the world, is not comparable to the Asian developing economies (Morrison 2019).

The rationale for selecting the 27 countries across the six geographical regions is countries which are considerably active in the HEI policy arena to enable the researchers to analyse the policy documents (De Wit at al 2015). Therefore, the criteria for the selection focused on key quantifiable determinants of active HEI: inbound international student mobility, percentage of international scientific co-publications, international collaboration impact, value of awarded research grants, and number of universities in the top 500 rankings within a country (Demeter 2019; De Wit and Altbach 2021; Lipura and Collins 2020). Using this criterion, countries which had the highest scores in their region in at least 4 of the 5 indicators were selected to represent the 6 geographical regions (see Table 1).

The key limitation to using the above criterion is that certain geographical areas and countries which could have been more representative were excluded. For example, countries from Eastern Europe and the Middle East and North Africa are excluded despite being key players in HEI in recent years. This is primarily because the research reviewed policy documents in Chinese, English, German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese and it was not feasible to adequately translate and review documents in other languages due to limited language proficiency. Furthermore, there are instances in which some countries excluded from the list scored higher than some selected countries in some of the indicators in Table 1. This raises the issue of selection bias, firstly on the selection indicators and the assumptions (Collier et al 2004). However, it is assumed that the sample is large and representative enough to capture the variations across and within geographical regions.

Table 1 Selected countries for the content analysis and associated metrics on key HEI activities

	International student inbound mobility rate *	% of international scientific co-publications (2018–2023)**	International collaboration impact (2018–2023)**	Awarded Grant Value (USD) (2018–2023)**	Number of universities in QS top 500 rankings (2023)***
North America					
Regional average		36	17.1	53.539M	
Canada	17.37	55	18.0	10.302M	22
USA	4.89	36.2	17.9	43.385M	150
Western and Northern Europe					
Regional average		38.8	14.5	66.634M	
France	9.14	57.1	17.1	17.135M	12
Germany	11.23	51.5	17.3	23.237M	35
Netherlands	13.72	63.1	20.2	14.866M	13
Norway	4.17	62.5	18.3	5.483M	3
United Kingdom (UK)	21.57	57.8	18.0	41.032M	44
Asia and Oceania (global north)					
Regional average		22.2	16.520M	18.2	
China	0.37	20.9	19.5	2.833M	50
Australia	21.89	58	20.1	8.304M	23
Japan	5.57	30.8	16.6	13.219M	12
New Zealand	11.98	60	18.1	323M	3
South Korea	4.36	31	18.8	321M	14
Sub-Saharan Africa					
Regional average		52.5	12.2	1.933M	
Botswana	2.47	73.6	15.8	44M	0
Ethiopia	-	49.1	13.3	155M	0
Kenya	1.29	76.8	14.8	365M	0

Table 1 (continued)

	International student inbound mobility rate *	% of international scientific co-publications (2018-2023)**	International collaboration impact (2018–2023)**	Awarded Grant Value (USD) (2018–2023)**	Number of universities in QS top 500 rankings (2023)***
Nigeria	-	49.5	12.5	82M	0
South Africa	2.92	52.4	15.7	942M	4
Latin America and Caribbean					
Regional average		38.5	12.5	921M	1
Argentina	3.16	46.3	15.8	200M	5
Brazil	0.25	34.6	13.8	290M	0
Colombia	0.22	48.3	13.0	149M	0
Cuba	2.18	50.1	8.1	–	0
Mexico	1.18	41.7	14.0	80M	1
South and Southeast Asia					
Regional average		26.9			
Cambodia	0.26	89.7	10.0	1.39M	0
India	0.12	21.1	13.9	328M	0
Malaysia	8.97	48.4	13.8	86M	4
Pakistan	-	61.6	15.5	83M	0
Thailand	1.44	42.9	12.8	183M	2

*http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=3804

**https://www.scival.com

***https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings?region=North%20America&countries=us

Document Sampling Process

In this paper, "policy documents" were defined as "written documents that contain strategies and priorities and define goals and objectives" of a policy issue (Daugbjerg et al. 2009, 806). These include strategic policies and plans, legislative laws and decrees, recommendations and guidelines, and activities and programmes related to HEI (Fig. 1). The policy documents analysis focused on the years 2000–2021 as this period captures recent and comparable policy developments in HEI amongst the selected countries. Given the interconnectedness of policy, there are references to policies prior to 2000 in some instances.

To collect and store the policy documents, the research relied on web scrapping using Python programming, firstly, from the online World Higher Education Database (WHED) and secondly, from national government agency websites (Lawson 2015). The WHED database is useful because it gathers systematic information about higher education systems, national bodies responsible for higher education and international cooperation, and related policies. To search for the HEI related documents, the Python algorithm focused on HEI internationalization activities including scholarships, academic mobility, research, cross-border education, curriculum, quality assurance, and science and technology (Knight 2004b, 2012, 2021).

Since the WHED database does not account for other sectoral government agencies which have related internationalization policies and plans, relevant policy documents were accessed from other government agency websites. With the support of the International Students Office, six research assistants with proficiency in English, Chinese, German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese were recruited to identify the web pages of national government agencies in the following six policy domains associated with HEI between January 2021 and April 2021: higher education, research, Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI), youth empowerment, foreign policy, and trade. The team could not find research assistants proficient in other languages in the sample countries, and as such relied on published literature, documents in English or already translated to English. After this two-step process, a total of 366 policy documents were collected for all 27 countries (Fig. 1). The non-English documents were then translated to English by the research assistants.

Content Analysis Process

The content analysis was conducted in three parts. During the first part, subject categories and codes on HEI were decided deductively from the literature (Table 2). The codes are short and descriptive labels that symbolically assigned a summative or salient attribute to units of meaning linked to the categories in the HEI rationales literature (Saldaña 2021). As discussed in the literature review above, traditionally, rationales driving internationalization have been categorized into four groups: socio/cultural, economic, political, and academic (Knight and De Wit 1997; Knight 2004a, b, 2021). Though there have been complexities and global disorders with implications on the rationales, the generic categories have

Table 2 Categories and codes linked to rationales driving internationalization at the national level (Adapted from Knight 2004a, b, p. 23)

Rationale categories	Codes
Social/cultural	Mutual understanding
	Prepare students for global world
	Redress and inclusion
	International development
	Address global problems
Economic	Build national reputation/competitiveness
	Economic benefits
	Workforce development
	Long-term national economic development
Academic	Knowledge creation and advancement
	Improving quality of higher education
	Expanding higher education capacity
Political	Diplomacy and soft power
	National interests (e.g. national identity, security, peace)
	Global citizenship

remained in analysing internationalization rationales (De Wit 2002a, b; Knight 2021; Wihlborg and Robson 2018). Maringe et al (2012) expanded the four broad categories to include technological and pedagogical rationales which are mostly linked to university level activities. As a result, these two rationales are combined with the academic rationales in this study. To further account for other unknown codes which might have been missed, 2 researchers examined 50 randomly selected policy documents from the sample using MAXQDA software. This process was valuable in improving the validity of the codes used for the content analysis. These codes were merged with the deductively derived ones to create those used for the content analysis in Table 2.

The second part included developing a schematic scoring system for the content analysis of the policy documents. The scoring schematic was developed to reflect the level of detail in the policy documents towards the codes linked to the internationalization rationales identified (Table 3). Each country was given a score between 0 and 3, depending on how systematically and rigorously the policy documents explained or inferences were made of each code—this third process is discussed in more detail below.

Table 3 Schematic scoring for the codes linked to rationales to higher education internationalization in the policy documents

Score	Description
0	Not mentioned or inferences at all in the document
1	Mentioned or inferred in the document, but there is no detailed explanation
2	Mentioned or inferred in the document, including brief explanation
3	Mentioned or inferred in the document, and the issue is comprehensively explained and discussed

To code and score the policy documents, latent projective analysis was used. This method uses normative inferences to discover implied meaning in the texts (Kleinheksel et al 2020). The method acknowledges that the researcher is intimately involved in the analytical process and their role is to actively use mental schema, theories, and lenses to interpret and understand the texts (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). For this study, the latent projective analysis allowed inferences or interpretations of the implicit or dominant meaning of the texts, or the implicit intentions of the authors of the policy documents. This is particularly the case when investigating the rationales to HEI because the intentions of policymakers are not always obvious. Due to the complexity of this process, it took 2 researchers 7 months from June 2021 to December 2021 to code the 366 policy documents. MAXQDA software was used to code the documents, identifying thematic issues or inferences linked to the codes and then weighing them between 0-3 using the weight function in the software. This meant that several codes with varying weights could be interpreted in one policy document.

A 3 was scored if a clear goal of the policy could be identified or inferred from the text. This could be related to characterization of a policy goal which might not be clearly defined but inferences from the coder's understanding of the literature could be used to provide guidance to score a 3 for the code. For example, Australia's geopolitical posture and competition are not explicit in the policy. However, the strong pivot to the Asia–Pacific in their internationalization strategy illustrates a strong focus to strengthen their presence in the region to compete with China. As such, they were scored a 3 for the diplomacy and soft power code. A score of 2 was given if the code was mentioned but no detailed explanation was given or the discussion on an issue linked to the code is not extensive. For example, Japan Council for the Future of Education Creation policy document mentions the country's intention to diversify their international student body. However, there is no significant discussion on the issue to provide more context. Therefore, a 2 was given for the diversity and inclusion code. A 1 was scored if no clear meaning of the goals of the policy document could be interpreted or the code linked to the rationale is mentioned in passing. This mostly applies to higher education policies by African countries which did not have stand-alone internationalization policies. A 0 was given if no inferences or mention of a code were made in the policy document. At the end of the coding process, mean values of the weights for each code were calculated for each document, tabulated, and presented in graph format per country (Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

Evidently the latent projective analysis used is very subjective. Therefore, to ensure the reliability of the scoring process, a consensual coding method was applied to determine whether coders agreed on the coding whilst using the same coding scheme (Kuckartz 2016). This meant 2 researchers coded 66 randomly selected documents together, comparing for similarity in segment selection and coding. Differences between the researchers were discussed, and a common understanding of the coding scheme was developed. Thereafter, each coder analysed 150 documents each. The function "intercoder agreement" of the MAXQDA software was used to determine the distribution of codes at the segment level (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019). The results showed between 86 and 95% intercoder agreement indicating a sufficient level of reliability.
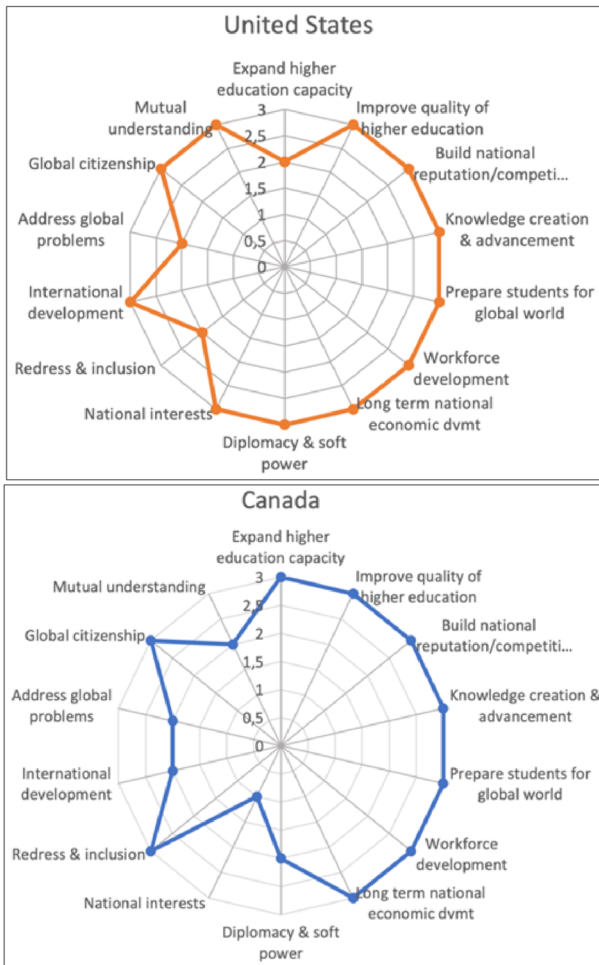
Fig. 2 National higher education internationalization policy rationales in North America

Findings

Internationalization Policy Rationales

North America

Socio-economic rationales predominantly drive internationalization policy in North America (Fig. 2). For example, in the joint statement of principles in support of international education, the US Department of State and the Department of Education recognizes the importance of international education "to the US economy, job creation, and innovation" (US Department of State & Department of Education 2021, p. 3). There are noticeable variations between the two countries in North

Fig. 3 National higher education internationalization policy rationales in Western and Northern Europe

America with political issues related to national security and international development seemingly considered slightly more important drivers in the USA than in Canada. To illustrate this, the joint statement of principles by the Department of State and Department of Education emphasizes the value of HEI in supporting "U.S. diplomacy by promoting people-to-people ties that create goodwill and mutual understanding [and] mitigate risks from malign actors" (p. 3). The US Fulbright Program has also played such a role in promoting US science diplomacy (Bettie 2019).

On the other hand, Canada scored better than the USA on inclusion and redress as well as the need to increase capacity (Fig. 2). This is reflected in Canada's International Education Strategy (IES) 2019–2024 which provides focus on diversifying the international student body "to foster sustainable growth of Canada's international

Fig. 4 National higher education internationalization policy rationales in global north countries in Oceania and East Asia

education sector and distribute the benefits more equitably across the country (Government of Canada 2019).

Western and Northern Europe

Apart from Norway (a non-EU member), which had average scores in some categories, most countries in Western and Northern Europe, including the UK (a former EU member), have relatively high scores on most of the socio-economic drivers to internationalization (Fig. 3). The EU Commission's higher education policies have shaped the direction of some HEI activities of EU member countries, which include Germany, France, and Netherlands. As an example, the EU's "Renewed Agenda for Higher Education" and the "European Skills Agenda for Sustainable
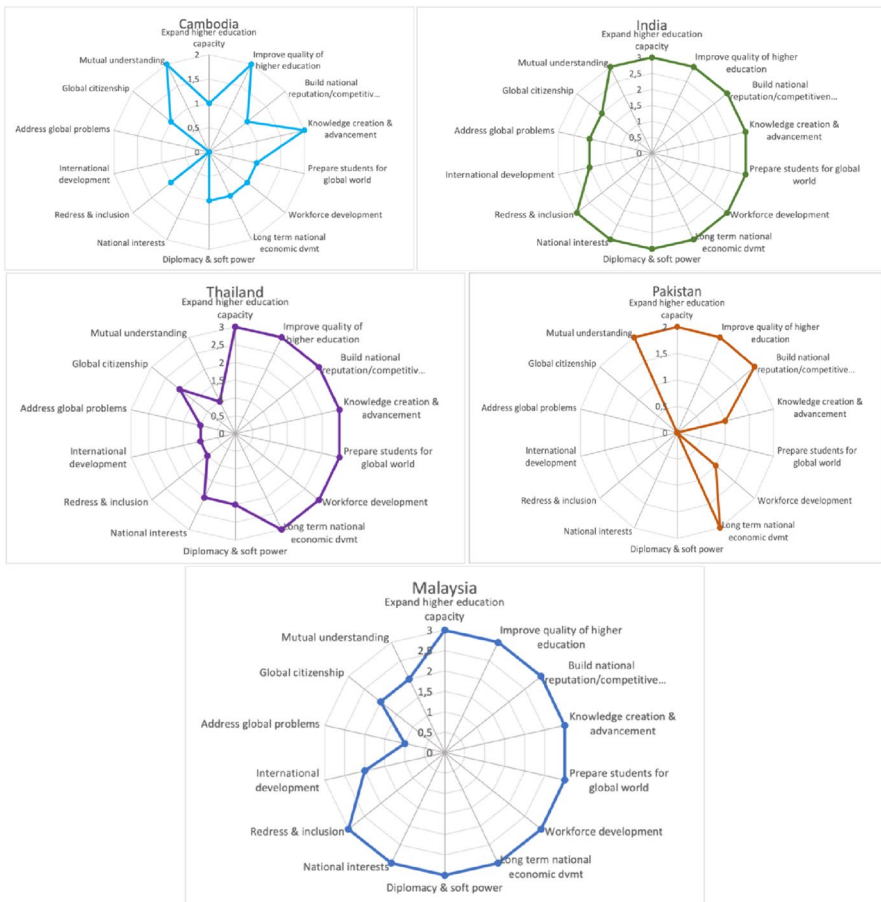
Fig. 5 National higher education internationalization policy rationales in South and Southeast Asia

Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience" puts a lot of emphasis on quality education "to deliver a bold skills agenda for jobs" (European Commission 2020, p. 3). The adoption of these policy agendas by member countries has been critiqued extensively, but what is evident is the socio-economic agenda setting direction provided by the regional bloc to the member countries.

On the other hand, the UK economic priorities are very explicit. The post-Brexit UK International Education Strategy (2021) has a goal to drive UK education export income from approximately $20bn to $35bn by 2030 (United Kingdom Government 2021). France's "Choose France/Bienvenue en France" plan is also illustrative of this emerging trend with its focus on increasing tuition fees for non-EU students by 16 times higher than their European counterparts since 2019 (Campus France 2018).

There is variation in other motivations related to security and national interests as well as inclusivity (Fig. 3). For example, the UK, France, and the Netherlands consider national interests as an important driver of internationalization compared
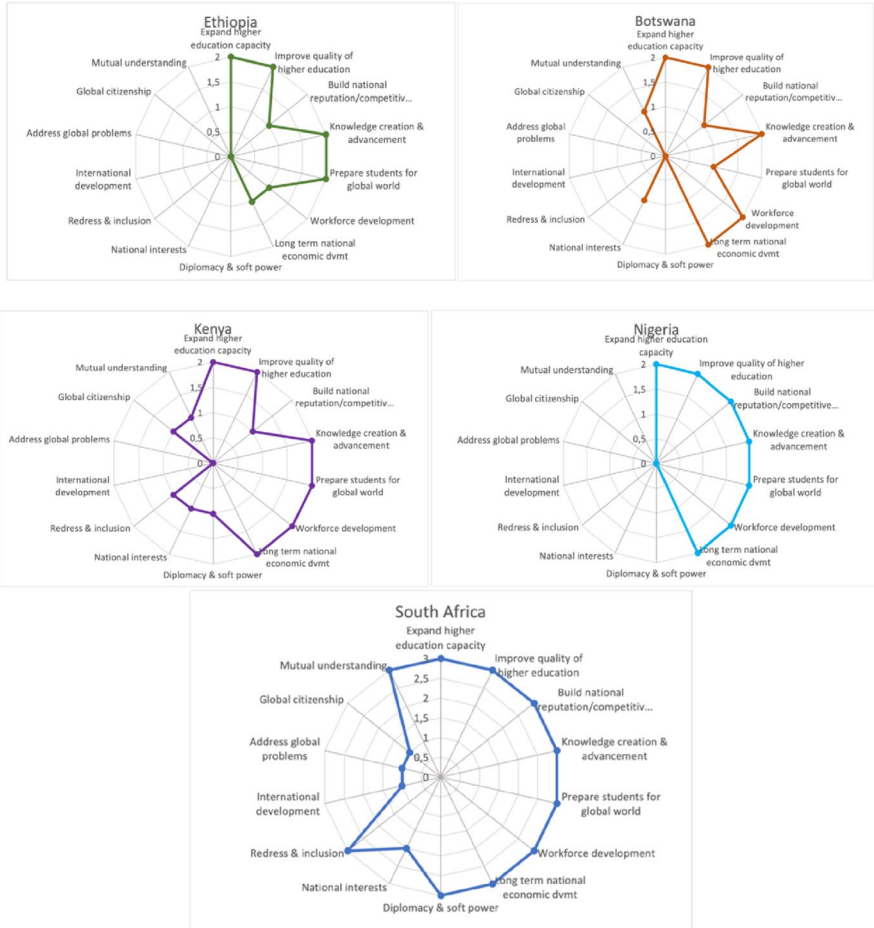
Fig. 6 National higher education internationalization policy rationales in Sub-Saharan Africa

to Norway (Fig. 3). In the Netherlands, due to concerns of the growing number of international students, the language and accessibility bill was initiated in 2019 to "safeguard the quality of education, promote Dutch language skills and control the influx of international students" (Haverkort 2023). In his speech providing a roadmap to France's soft power, France's Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drain noted that since 2017 France had "redefined its cultural presence in the USA by creating Villa Albertine, a new concept offering French residency programmes" (Le Drian 2021).

Germany consistently scored very highly on drivers related to redress and inclusion, international development, and addressing global problems. As one of the highest recipients of refugees in the past decade, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) launched the special initiative "Tackling the Root Causes to Displacement—Reintegrating Refugees" to

Fig. 7 National higher education internationalization policy rationales in Latin America and the Caribbean

complement ongoing development cooperation and "support the inclusion of refugees in national education and technical vocational education and training systems" (BMZ 2020).

"Global North Countries" in Oceania and East Asia

Most "developed" economies in Oceania and East Asia also consider socio-economic rationales as important drivers of higher education internationalization (Fig. 4). In China, the HEI policies have evolved since the 1980s when it was focused on socio-economic development mostly through study abroad programme (MOE 1978). In recent years, whilst there is a continued prioritization of socio-economic development as China transitioned to a market economy, internationalization policies have evolved to focus on China's global impact and competitiveness (MOE 1999; State Council, 2015), the "care for humankind" (*guan huai ren lei*) (Central

Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 2017), and integration of Chinese historical and cultural traditions (MOE 2007).

In Australia and New Zealand, the socio-economic drivers are influenced by national governments' approach to diversifying their export industries through higher education (Harman 2004). Australia's "Strategy for International Education 2021–2030" focuses on "diversifying the international student cohorts and countries" to "meet the country's skills needs" whilst "enhancing economic growth and global competitiveness" (Australia Government 2021, p. 5). Similarly, New Zealand's "International Education Strategy 2022–2030" has a strong focus on fee-paying international student education experience (MOE New Zealand 2022).

In the case of Japan and South Korea, whilst there is an increased orientation towards attracting international students and enhancing the competitiveness of the higher education system (e.g. through the Top University Project in Japan to promote collaboration globally ranked institutions), there is also a gradual focus on integrating the export-oriented approach with the knowledge-oriented approach (e.g. Specified Skilled

Within the political rationales, China and Australia score significantly higher than other countries on rationales linked to national interests, diplomacy and soft power, and mutual understanding. The establishment of Confucian institutes is illustrative of China's exertion of its culture in partnerships (MOE 2004). Furthermore, due to concerns of losing its educational sovereignty and the country's nominal emphasis on the socialist ideology, China places strict controls on international partnerships (Lo and Pan 2021). In the case of Australia, section 4 of the 2022 International Education Strategy together with policy reviews such as the Bradley Review in 2008 and the Chaney Report in 2013 emphasize the positioning of the country regionally and ensuring the internationalization strategy fosters the country's interests (Australia Government 2021; Bradley et al. 2008; Chaney 2013).

South and Southeast Asia

Malaysia, Thailand, and India have considerably high scores on socio-economic rationales compared to the low-moderate scores for Pakistan and Cambodia (Fig. 5). Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 outlined the country's aspirations to create a higher education system that enables Malaysia to compete in the "global economy", "establish Malaysia as an international hub of higher education", and "produce human capital with the first-class mentality" (MMoE 2015, p. 3). This is linked to the country's long-term goal to attract 250,000 international students annually by 2025. In doing so, the country is acquiring agency and challenging the traditional narratives in higher education internationalization.

In the case of India, the country's 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) and related regulations have provisions which allow "world class universities" to set up campuses in the country in collaboration with local partners to ensure progressive competition and increase overall quality of the education system (MHRD 2020). In Thailand, the higher education system has continually been based on internal models to assist the country's development and participation in the global economy (Rhein 2016). On the other hand, Cambodia and Pakistan have

relatively limited strategic approaches to higher education internationalization, often prioritizing policy reform and system expansion (Chao 2016).

Malaysia and India also scored very highly on rationales linked to redress and inclusion, national interests, diplomacy, and soft power, whilst Thailand had moderate scores on national interest and diplomacy rationales (Fig. 5). In the case of India, despite the limited resources the country continues to provide educational and cultural support to several African and South Asian countries, (Isar 2017). This is line with efforts to restore the country as a "*Vishwa Guru*" (global teacher) and build south–south partnerships dating back to the pre-colonial era (MHRD 2020, p. 39).

Thailand's moderate scores on national interests reflect its gradual pivot on regionalization. Together with other middle-income countries in the region, Thailand has played an important role in promoting regional initiatives such as the SEAMEO RIHED and ASEAN AIMS Programme with a mission to foster efficiency, effectiveness, and harmonization of higher education in Southeast Asia (Chao 2016).

Sub-Saharan Africa

Apart from South Africa, all the selected African countries lack explicit internationalization strategies which explains the relatively moderate to low scores on most of the rationales (Fig. 6). In the case of South Africa, the only country in the region with a stand-alone internationalization policy, the socio-economic motivations seem to stand out. The 2021 Policy Framework for Internationalization is explicit on this with a goal "to position the higher education system to be competitive, advance quality of higher education, benefit society, contribute to the public good, and development of scholars and scholarship" (DHET 2021, p. 20).

Internationalization is absent or mentioned in passing in the education policies of the other Sub-Saharan countries. This seems to suggest that HEI, which is often dominated by outbound student mobility, is dictated by domestic factors related to access to quality education and developing a globally competitive workforce (Kritz 2015; Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck 2015). This is evident in Kenya and Nigeria's education policies which to utilize internationalization to increase STEM programmes and the quality of higher education programmes (Government of Kenya 2017; FME 2014.

The high scores in diplomacy, soft power, and mutual understanding for South Africa reflect the country's standing as the most influential regional geopolitical force which is the third largest recipient of outbound international students from Africa (Fig. 6). As such, the internationalization policy framework prioritizes Southern African Development Community (SADC) states, the African continent, BRICS, and the global south in its HEI engagements. In line with the African National Congress (ANC) led government's Pan-African roots, South Africa has been a key driver of BRICS higher education partnerships with Brazil, Russia, India, and China through the launch of the BRICS University League.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Brazil and Cuba scored very highly on all the rationales (Fig. 7). Cuba`s high scores are linked to its strong international academic cooperation despite the unfavourable international environment that limits its strategies (Gacel-Ávila 2020). Many of these international agreements are with developing countries, mostly in Latin America and Africa, combined with growing partnerships with Europe. In relation to Brazil, despite not having a stand-alone internationalization strategy, the country has developed internationalization programmes such as Science Without Borders (SWB) and Capes-Print which promote quality higher education through academic mobility. The *Capes-Print* programme's objectives have strong focus on "stimulating the formation of international research networks with a view to improving the quality of academic production" (CAPES 2017, p. 12).

Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia have started prioritizing HEI in recent decades, with more focus on the socio-economic rationales (Perrotta 2016; Gacel-Avila 2020). For example, the Colombia Ministry of National Education internationalization efforts prioritize "greater exchange of knowledge, technology transfer and research, and improvement of accreditation standards" (MNE 2017).

Regional-level efforts promoting regional integration such as the Southern Common Market and Mercosur have been critical in shaping these national efforts (Batista, 2021; Theiler 2015). Brazil and Argentina together with Paraguay and Uruguay have led efforts to establish the Triennial Plan for MERCUSOR Education Area focused on regional economic and academic integration.

Regarding political rationales, Brazil and Cuba have high scores (Fig. 7). This is particularly a result of their regional diplomatic efforts and scholarship programmes in developing countries, which extend their global diplomatic aspirations that focus on building strong alliances and mutual understanding across Latin America and the global south. For example, Brazil's *Programa de Estudantes-Convênio de Graduação* (PEC-G) and the *Programa de Estudantes-Convênio de PósGraduação (PEC-PG)* scholarship programmes targeting international students from Africa. The government considers these programmes as educational cooperation that seeks to increase Brazil's role on the international stage through assistance to global south countries and fostering cultural cooperation and mutual understanding with global south. (CAPES 2022, p. 11).

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has revealed the varying and related complexities to rationales HEI policies between the Global North and Global South countries. Within the dominant socio-economic dimension of internationalization, there was considerable variation in the manifestation of these rationales depending on the context and priorities. In the global north, predominantly in the English-speaking countries—UK, Australia, and New Zealand, internationalization has a strong market and commercialized orientation focused on attracting fee-paying international students (Robertson 2010; Shukr 2017). This model of internationalization is gradually spreading to Canada

and continental Europe—countries which prioritized the social and academic aspects of internationalization in the past (De Wit and Altbach 2021).

The study also showed that in recent years a few middle-income countries in the global south (e.g. Malaysia) have also adopted this market-centred and commercialized model of higher education internationalization and started to compete for international students with the traditional markets. This trend reflects the shifts in agency in international higher education (Bamberger and Morris 2023; Glass and Cruz 2022). This shows that in the push for and from globalization, traditional models and trends linked to internationalization are being challenged by multipolar models in increasingly competitive environments (Ge 2022).

In the global south, the research findings also suggest that the dominant socioeconomic dimensions were mostly shaped by massification and the global knowledge economy (Rumbley et al 2022; Brunner and Labraña 2020). The burgeoning youth population and reforms in education, particularly, in Africa have increased the demand for quality higher education (Marginson 2016). To cope with this increased demand, these countries have facilitated bilateral and multilateral academic and student mobility programmes (Choudaha 2017; Riaño et al. 2018; Teichler 2017).

The research findings also reveal that the global knowledge economy has similarly necessitated an increased focus on higher education internationalization in both the global south and north. In Asia, there is evidence in the reorientation of developmental states moving from export-oriented, investment-led growth to knowledge-intensive, investment-led growth—with increased focus on attracting global talent (Jessop 2016; Altbach and Jalote 2020). At the same time, global north countries which are experiencing shifting demographics and stagnating Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) are increasingly promoting policies to attract scholars from the global south (Choudaha 2017; Teichler 2017). This has created tensions in the global north with policymakers balancing the need for imported skilled talent and nationalists' pressures to reduce the influx of immigrants (Hazelkorn 2020). These tensions have been compounded by the current global disorders such as technological disruptions and geopolitical instabilities.

The manner in which the socio-economic rationales manifest differently across countries shows how the benefits and effects of internationalization as a "global cultural frame" vary in diverse contexts (Buckner 2019; Suarez and Bromley 2016). This suggests that policymakers are "translating" and "editing" the globalized model of internationalization and imbuing it with "new meanings to align to the language, needs, values, or cultural frames of the local context" (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008, 220).

Political rationales linked to national security, international diplomacy, and soft power are the second dominant driver to internationalization, predominantly amongst global and regional powers. This is mostly associated with the competitive nature of global higher education and the disintegration of the global world order (Kuzminov and Yudkevich 2022). Global south regional powers (e.g. BRICS members with alliances dating back to colonial resistance) were designing internationalization policies to challenge the existing dominant Western paradigms (Alessi 2012).

Postcolonial theories have often been used to describe this political shift which acknowledges the need to address global political, economic, epistemic, and

ontological power inequalities (Stein 2021a; Suspitsyna 2021; Xu 2023). However, authors such as Bamberger and Morris 2023; Stein 2021b; Mulvey 2022 have critiqued this conceptual framing. These authors argue that this postcolonial framing adopts a bipolar view of geopolitics which does not serve as the organizing frame in an increasingly complex and multipolar geopolitical context. The critiques also argue that global south states such as China and India which have high political rationales scores are capable of perpetuating dominant national identities and visions in their regions which may become imperial or colonial (Bamberger and Morris 2023; Tröhler 2023).

The political rationales in the global south also indicate the increased importance of regionalization as a driver to internationalization as regional blocs conformed to or challenged developments in the EU Higher Education Area and the global north (Knight and Woldegiorgis 2017; Chou and Ravinet 2015; Khalid et al. 2019; Batista 2021; Kim 2016). This was informed by shared values and identity in these regional blocs, particularly, Southeast Asia and Latin America. The research in Europe shows some of the limitations of regional higher education models. For example, Vellamo et al (2022) showed how Finnish institutions have resisted losing their autonomy in relation to the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters Programmes in the EU.

The results also suggest that narrow self-interest priorities shaped by global competition are starting to be challenged as they undermine addressing complex socio-ecological global challenges. Due to these critiques, this paper provides evidence from a few countries mostly in Western Europe and in the global south which suggest a shift linking internationalization to global common goals—giving rise to the notion of "internationalization for society" (Jones et al. 2021). This perspective also aligns with efforts to link internationalization with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (de Wit and Altbach 2021). However, some scholars have argued that this overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approach does not facilitate transformational change as it continues the "enduring patterns of Eurocentric knowledge production, exploitative relationships, and inequitable access to resources" (Stein 2021a, b, p. 1773, see also Bamberger and Morris 2023; Mulvey 2022; Ziai 2019).

The above analysis points to complexity in eliciting meaning to HEI in different contexts. The evidence from this paper shows that whilst the HEI concept and related rationales have been framed as a contemporary economic and commercialized trend driven by the global north, the phenomenon is increasingly complex and multipolar with new global south actors acquiring agency (Tight 2022; Glass and Cruz 2022). More so, local, national, and regional contexts, and the current geopolitical disorders are steadily shaping the HEI agendas, pointing to diverse ways in which actors are interpreting the benefits of the global phenomenon in consideration of their nation's particular priorities.

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