

The Impact of Internationalization Strategies on International Students' Satisfaction and Career Paths: An Empirical Study of Provincial Public Universities in Shandong, China

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Received October 12, 2024; **Revised** November 6, 2024; **Accepted** November 30, 2024

Abstract

This study examines the impact of provincial public universities' internationalization strategies on international students' satisfaction and career paths, with a focus on mediating effects of student engagement, equity, and well-being. Through a survey of international students from five leading universities in Shandong Province, China, this study applies structural equation modeling to verify the hypotheses. The findings revealed that the internationalization strategy significantly influences students' engagement (coefficient = 0.612), equity (coefficient = 0.686), and well-being (coefficient = 0.714). Student engagement demonstrated crucial mediating effects, accounting for 15.707% of the total effect on satisfaction, while equity and well-being contributed 23.308% and 22.056% respectively. The results confirmed that the internationalization strategy of higher education institutions (HEIs) positively influences international students' overall experience and development. The implications suggest that HEIs should enhance their internationalization strategies by focusing on resource integration, career guidance services, and creating an inclusive campus environment to improve both the educational experience and career development of international students.

Keywords: higher education institutions; internationalization strategy; engagement; well-being and equity; satisfaction; career path

Introduction

The rapid globalization of higher education has fundamentally transformed the landscape of university education, creating new challenges in curriculum internationalization, cross-cultural communication, and quality assurance systems (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Recent research indicates that globalization has accelerated the need for universities to develop more sophisticated international student support services and innovative teaching approaches (Huang & Turner, 2022). The standard of school management has consistently lagged behind the demands of higher education in a globalized environment (Howard, 2021).

Recent data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics shows that the global international student population reached 6.1 million in 2021, representing a 25% increase from 2017. Asia continues to be the fastest-growing region for international student mobility, with China hosting over 450,000 international students in 2021 (UNESCO, 2022). Furthermore, OECD's latest education report indicates that despite global challenges, international student enrollment has shown remarkable resilience, with a projected annual growth rate of 4% between 2022 and 2025 (OECD, 2022).

Student engagement in international education is essential for recommending a comprehensive approach to the HEI's internationalization strategy (Phan et al., 2019). Higher education institutions are responsible for cultivating students with the capability of career planning and professional skills (Liu et al., 2019). As international students, the school's international curriculum and internationalization strategy impact their career path (Tiro et al., 2021).

With global trends, the increasing population of international students presents significant challenges for universities in managing and servicing this diverse student population. Chinese universities seldom proactively conduct satisfaction surveys among international students to identify and address deficiencies in their management services (Jin & Schneider, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to examine the levels of international students' satisfaction, to propose policy recommendations for management services and the advancement of the HEI's internationalization in China. Above all, higher education institutions' management strategy, international students' engagement, and international students' equity and well-being have an impressive impact on international students' satisfaction (Neto, 2023) and career paths (Palmié. et al., 2023), and affect the sustainability and development of universities.

Research Objective

1. To study the level degree of China's provincial public universities' internationalization strategies and find the disadvantaged sides of internationalization management.
2. To study the impact of HEI internationalization strategy on international student engagement, international student well-being and equity, international student satisfaction, and career paths.
3. To study the intermediate effect of international student engagement, equity, and well-being that affect the relationship between HEI internationalization strategy and international student satisfaction and career paths. And provide recommendations for a more effective strategic model of provincial public universities' internationalization management.

Scope of Research

This research examines the relationship between internationalization strategies and international students' outcomes in Provincial Public Universities, focusing on student engagement, equity, and well-being as intermediate variables.

The study selected five universities with the largest international student populations (over 500–1000 students each) from 42 provincial public universities in Shandong Province. These universities, with a total of 5,270 international students, represent the leading institutions in internationalization development, while other institutions typically maintain international student populations of 100–300. Following Daryle W. Morgan's sampling table (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), 500 questionnaires were distributed to ensure the collection of more than 358 valuable responses.

The research centers on Shandong Province, China, which has the largest number of provincial public universities (42) among China's 31 provinces. According to statistics from the Education Ministry of China (2023), provincial public universities account for 57% of the total 1,275 degree-offering institutions in the country, representing the general development level of Chinese provincial public universities.

This research was conducted from January 2023 to October 2024, during which the international student population remained dynamic due to different recruiting semesters.

Literature Review

The concept of internationalization strategy in higher education encompasses both programmatic and organizational initiatives that institutions implement to enhance their global engagement (Knight, 2003). De Wit and Altbach (2021) emphasize that an internationalization strategy requires a sophisticated framework capturing both quantitative indicators and qualitative aspects, including cultural integration, quality of international experience, and institutional commitment. To address this complexity, this study adopts a multi-dimensional measurement approach examining:

Management Philosophy and Implementation: Including institutional policies, resource allocation, and organizational structure supporting internationalization

Faculty Development: Measuring international faculty recruitment, training, and exchange programs

Curriculum Internationalization: Assessing international program design, teaching methods, and learning outcomes

Research Collaboration: Evaluating international research partnerships, joint publications, and academic exchanges

Campus Support Services: Examining student services, cultural integration programs, and infrastructure support

This study examines two distinct but interrelated dependent variables: international students' satisfaction and career paths. These variables are inherently connected, as research shows that students' satisfaction with their educational experience significantly influences their career planning, while career development opportunities affect students' overall satisfaction (Mohammed et al., 2021). HEI internationalization strategy contributes to the educational environment and services, ultimately influencing students' satisfaction with the quality of education (Canaj et al., 2022). International research collaborations enhance academic abilities and provide direct access to global professional networks (Gudz et al., 2019). The strong support network helps international students adapt to new environments, directly influencing their career paths (González-Bonilla et al., 2021).

H1: Internationalization strategy has a positive impact on international students' satisfaction.

H2: Internationalization strategy has a positive impact on international students' career paths.

International students' engagement is influenced by the educational environment and learning activities, which are tied to the higher education institutions' internationalization strategy (Canaj et al., 2022). Cross-cultural exchanges and interactions offer international student opportunities to connect with peers and faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds (Susanto et al., 2023). The internationalization of the learning environment fosters an optimal atmosphere for enhancing student engagement (Zyberaj et al., 2022). Students should have equal opportunities to realize their full potential, regardless of their background. Equity manifests in daily activities, educational practices, resource distribution, and education efficiency, all closely related to the internationalization strategy of HEIs (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). For international university students, well-being is crucial (Canaj et al., 2022), and it depends on educational quality, environment, and effective internationalization strategies (Jones et al., 2021). These elements are essential in fostering a supportive and enriching experience for students.

H3: Internationalization strategy has a positive impact on international students' engagement.

H4: Internationalization strategy has a positive impact on international students' equity.

H5: Internationalization strategy has a positive impact on international students' well-being.

International students' engagement significantly influences their satisfaction with the educational experience. Research indicates that high engagement enhances the sense of belonging and identity (Dong, 2019; Susanto et al., 2023), subsequently bolstering their satisfaction with institutional support (Zyberaj et al., 2022). Moreover, through participating in career development activities and interacting with industry professionals, international students acquire a more profound understanding of career paths within their desired industries.

H6: International students' engagement has a positive impact on international students' satisfaction.

H7: International students' engagement has a positive impact on international students' career paths.

Educational resources and equitable treatment significantly enhance students' learning experiences and career development (Lee et al., 2021). The accessibility of teaching facilities, administrative services, and student welfare services have direct correlations with student satisfaction (Gustavsson et al., 2021).

H8: International students' equity has a direct impact on international students' satisfaction

H9: International students' equity has a direct impact on international students' career paths.

Research indicates that mental health and positive emotional experiences facilitate students' optimal performance during their studies and impact their career choices (Mohammed et al., 2021). International students with higher well-being levels tend to demonstrate stronger career self-confidence and planning skills (Lodi et al., 2022). A positive mental state helps them develop more open-minded career perspectives in the context of globalization (Lodi et al., 2021).

H10: International students' well-being has a direct impact on international students' satisfaction.

H11: International students' well-being has a direct impact on international students' career paths.

Research indicates that universities' internationalization policies significantly influence international students' overall engagement, satisfaction, and career development paths (Susanto et al., 2023). Students' engagement serves as a crucial intermediary factor, improving overall satisfaction and broadening career options (Canaj et al., 2022). Meanwhile, international students' perception of equity shapes their learning experiences and career development decision-making (Lodi et al., 2021). The well-being of international students influences their satisfaction and career planning (Sá & Serpa, 2020). Therefore, the internationalization strategy indirectly enhances international students' satisfaction and career paths by improving engagement, equity, and well-being.

H12: International students' engagement mediates the relationship between HEIs' Internationalization strategy and international students' satisfaction.

H13: International students' engagement mediates the relationship between HEIs' Internationalization strategy and international students' career paths.

H14: International students' equity mediates the relationship between HEIs' Internationalization strategy and international students' satisfaction.

H15: International students' equity mediates the relationship between HEIs' Internationalization strategy and international students' career paths.

H16: International students' well-being mediates the relationship between HEIs' Internationalization strategy and international students' satisfaction.

H17: International students' well-being mediates the relationship between HEIs' Internationalization strategy and international students' career paths.

Based on the interrelationships of the variables, the framework of the research was established based on the hypotheses as shown in Figure 1.

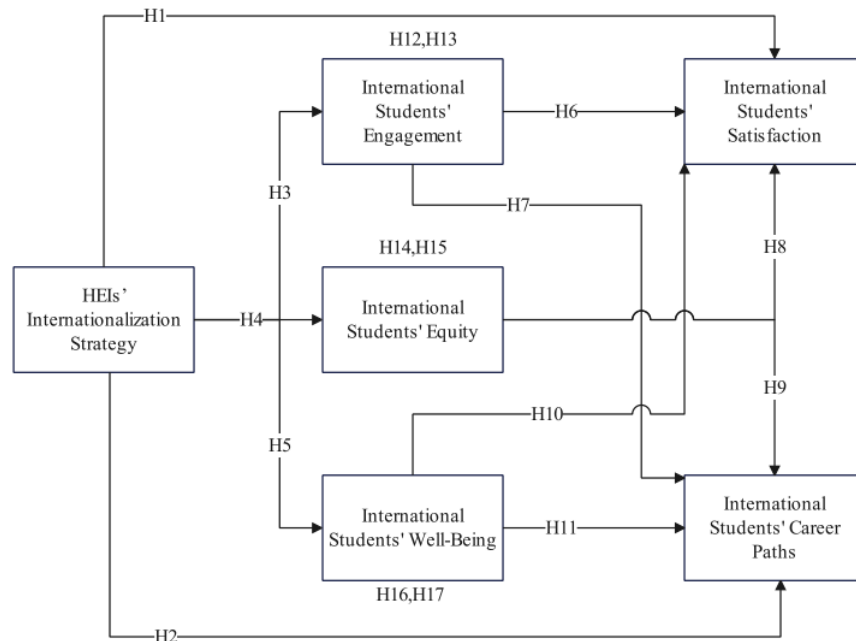


Figure 1 Research Framework

Research Methodology

The quantitative research method is employed in this study. The data collection process was conducted systematically from March to June 2023, with questionnaires distributed to international students at five selected universities in Shandong Province. Through both online and paper-based channels, questionnaires were distributed via official WeChat groups, university email systems, and international student activities. To ensure questionnaire accessibility, both English and Chinese versions were provided, with trained research assistants available for clarification. These efforts contributed to achieving a high response rate of 71.6%, with 358 valid responses from the 500 distributed questionnaires.

The internationalization strategy indicators were developed based on two key frameworks: "Index of Internationalization Level of Higher Education in Shandong Province" (2018) and "The Index System of Higher Education Quality Certification for Foreign Students Study in China" (2018). For measuring international student engagement, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)

was adopted, comprising three states: vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Fraser (2007) three criteria of justice—redistribution, recognition, and representation—serve as frameworks for assessing equity. The international students' well-being scale incorporates features from the Australian Unity Well-being Index (Cummins et al., 2003) and the World Values Survey (Fomicheva, 2020). The research builds models according to Tiro et al. (2021) and Calvert (2021) for international students' career paths.

The analysis of reliability was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha and Corrected Item–Total Correlation (CITC). Confirmatory Factor Analysis was employed for validation, including assessment of path coefficients, average variance extracted (AVE) values, and composite reliability (CR). The structural equation model's fit degree was evaluated using indicators such as GFI, CFI, AGFI, and RMSEA. Path analysis was performed to test the hypotheses and draw conclusions.

Research Results

According to the survey, the average mean score for the internationalization strategy is 3.613, indicating that international students' recognition of the HEI internationalization strategies is above average. This score breaks down into four dimensions: international concept and management (3.725), teaching staff and curriculum (3.584), research and cooperation (3.562), and support service (3.581), showing balanced development across different aspects. The average mean score for engagement of international students is 3.611, suggesting a moderately high level of engagement. The average mean score for equity of international students is 3.671, which signifies higher than average recognition of the school's equity. The average mean score for well-being of international students is 3.674, reflecting a higher-than-average perception of well-being among students. The average mean score for satisfaction of international students is 3.593, indicating satisfaction above average. In the career development section, international students demonstrated strong agreement with the statements "I have a career plan for my current occupation" and "I will work abroad in 10 years."

The structural equation modeling reveals that the internationalization strategy of universities exerts a positive and direct influence on international students' engagement (coefficient = 0.612), equity (coefficient = 0.686), and well-being (coefficient = 0.714), all of which are statistically significant. The impact on satisfaction (coefficient = 0.201) and career paths (coefficient = 0.265), while not reaching statistical significance, still reflects a relatively positive effect. These coefficients

underscore that universities' internationalization strategies positively influence students' overall experience and development.

The analysis of mediating effects reveals significant indirect impacts through multiple pathways. International student engagement's indirect effect on satisfaction is 0.090 (15.707% of total effect) and on career paths is 0.122 (21.295% of total effect), indicating that engaged students better utilize international resources and opportunities. The equity pathway shows an indirect effect of 0.134 (23.308% of total effect) on satisfaction and 0.151 (26.270% of total effect) on career paths, demonstrating its critical role in the model. Similarly, well-being's indirect effect on satisfaction is 0.127 (22.056% of total effect), and on career paths is 0.144 (25.153% of total effect), highlighting its significant contribution to overall outcomes.

The structural validity assessment demonstrated excellent results, with the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeding 0.5 and composite reliability (CR) above 0.7 for all variables, meeting the established standards (Hair et al., 2010; Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as shown in Table 1.

Table Results of the Analysis

Variables	Dimension	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
HEIs' Internationalization Strategy	The university's international concept and management	0.649	0.902	0.931
	The university's international teaching staff and curriculum	0.644	0.900	
	The university's international research and cooperation	0.592	0.879	
	The university's support service	0.588	0.877	
International Students' Engagement	Vigor	0.600	0.883	0.915
	Dedication	0.601	0.882	
	Absorption	0.579	0.873	
International Students' Equity	–	0.631	0.895	0.893
International Students' Well-Being	–	0.612	0.887	0.885
International Students' Satisfaction	Educational quality	0.614	0.905	0.928
	Campus international service	0.612	0.888	
	Scholarship	0.699	0.874	
	Career Guidance	0.655	0.904	
International Students' Career Paths	Profession as career intention	0.617	0.828	0.907
	Entrepreneurial work intention	0.628	0.910	
	Expatriate work intention	0.683	0.866	

Correlation analysis of study variables showed strong discriminant validity, with the square root of AVE consistently exceeding the Pearson correlation coefficients. The maximum correlation coefficient of 0.9 satisfies established criteria, as shown in Table 2. The model demonstrated excellent fit with a Chi-square value of 285.018 (df = 241), resulting in a Chi-square/df ratio of 1.183. All fit indices met requisite standards, with GFI, IFI, and CFI exceeding 0.9, and RMSEA at 0.022, well below the acceptable threshold of 0.08.

Table 2 Discriminant validity analysis

	√AVE	ISAM	ISBM	ISCM	ISDM	VI	DE	AB	Equ	WE	EQ	CIS	SCH	CG	PAI	ENWI	EXWI
ISAM	0.806	0.806															
ISBM	0.802	.473**	0.802														
ISCM	0.769	.502**	.459**	0.769													
ISDM	0.767	.539**	.413**	.609**	0.767												
VIG	0.775	.311**	.335**	.362**	.418**	0.775											
DE	0.775	.336**	.274**	.362**	.404**	.594**	0.775										
AB	0.761	.247**	.223**	.260**	.368**	.497**	.466**	0.761									
Equ	0.794	.418**	.368**	.400**	.466**	.224**	.240**	.219**	0.794								
WE	0.782	.416**	.356**	.484**	.463**	.264**	.183**	.127*	.377**	0.782							
EQ	0.784	.366**	.321**	.388**	.419**	.310**	.291**	.215**	.395**	.393**	0.784						
CIS	0.782	.360**	.309**	.328**	.350**	.322**	.257**	.285**	.387**	.392**	.445**	0.782					
SCH	0.836	.346**	.330**	.386**	.411**	.285**	.267**	.197**	.458**	.386**	.496**	.463**	0.836				
CG	0.809	.350**	.276**	.335**	.451**	.310**	.254**	.245**	.387**	.379**	.506**	.482**	.516**	0.809			
PAI	0.785	.294**	.222**	.361**	.353**	.238**	.251**	.170**	.276**	.340**	.271**	.190**	.259**	.264**	0.785		
ENWI	0.792	.385**	.339**	.474**	.461**	.396**	.382**	.327**	.428**	.462**	.360**	.355**	.339**	.305**	.468**	0.792	
EXWI	0.826	.334**	.336**	.432**	.430**	.343**	.324**	.302**	.453**	.435**	.326**	.359**	.407**	.363**	.445**	.556**	0.826

NOTE: * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001, ISAM is the university's international concept and management. ISBM is the university's international teaching staff and curriculum. ISCM is the university's international research and cooperation. ISDM is the university's support service. VIG is Vigor. DE is Dedication. AB is Absorption. Equ is Equity. WE is Well-being. EQ is educational quality. CIS is Campus international service. SCH is Scholarship. CG is Career guidance. PAI is Profession as career intention. ENWI is Entrepreneurial work intention. EXWI is Expatriate work intention.

Table 3 Results of Indirect Effects Tests

Path	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	Percentage%
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ---> International students' satisfaction Total Effect	0.575	0.418	13.744	0.000	0.493	0.657	-
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ---> International students' satisfaction Direct Effect	0.224	0.054	4.117	0.000	0.117	0.331	38.929
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ---> International students' engagement ---> International students' satisfaction Indirect Effect	0.090	0.025	-	-	0.046	0.141	15.707
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ---> Equity ---> International students' satisfaction Indirect Effect	0.134	0.027	-	-	0.084	0.191	23.308
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ---> Well-being ---> International students' satisfaction Indirect Effect	0.127	0.027	-	-	0.074	0.181	22.056
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ---> Career paths Total Effect	0.573	0.053	10.791	0.000	0.469	0.677	-

HEIs Internationalization Strategies ----> Career paths Direct Effect	0.157	0.070	2.237	0.000	0.259	0.019	27.352
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ----> International Students Engagement ----> Career paths Indirect Effect	0.122	0.032	–	–	0.062	0.191	21.295
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ----> Equity ----> Career paths Indirect Effect	0.151	0.035	–	–	0.085	0.219	26.270
HEIs Internationalization Strategies ----> Well-being ----> Career paths Indirect Effect	0.144	0.033	–	–	0.079	0.212	25.153

Table 4 Testing results

	Path relationship	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
International Students Engagement	<--- HEIs Internationalization Strategies	0.612	0.068	8.958	***	Supported
Equity	<--- HEIs Internationalization Strategies	0.686	0.075	9.097	***	Supported
Well-being	<--- HEIs Internationalization Strategies	0.714	0.079	9.069	***	Supported
International Students satisfaction	<--- HEIs Internationalization Strategies	0.265	0.096	2.773	0.006	Supported
International students satisfaction	<--- International Students Engagement	0.183	0.066	2.790	0.005	Supported
International students satisfaction	<--- Equity	0.229	0.051	4.483	***	Supported
International students satisfaction	<--- Well-being	0.180	0.054	3.342	***	Supported
Career paths	<--- HEIs Internationalization Strategies	0.212	0.087	2.439	0.015	Supported
Career paths	<--- International Students Engagement	0.251	0.062	4.051	***	Supported
Career paths	<--- Equity	0.156	0.045	3.435	***	Supported
Career paths	<--- Well-being	0.199	0.050	4.005	***	Supported

Discussion

This study highlights that university internationalization strategies have positive effects on international students' experiences, particularly in enhancing engagement, equity, and well-being. (Canaj et al., 2022; Gudz et al., 2019; Sá & Serpa, 2020). The analysis of internationalization strategy levels reveals both achievements and challenges in implementation. While the overall mean score of 3.613 indicates positive recognition from international students, the effectiveness varies across different strategic dimensions. Administrative procedures and academic programs demonstrate strong implementation, yet cultural integration aspects require further development.

The examination of direct effects presents significant insights into the relationship between internationalization strategies and student outcomes. The substantial impacts on engagement (0.612), equity (0.686), and well-being (0.714) suggest that universities' internationalization efforts effectively support student development. The relatively modest direct impacts on satisfaction (0.201) and career paths (0.265) indicate that universities should strengthen their resource integration and support services. Cultural and language barriers continue to pose challenges in strategy implementation, potentially limiting the direct benefits students receive from internationalization initiatives.

The mediating effects analysis provides a crucial understanding of how internationalization strategies influence student outcomes. The significant roles of engagement (15.707%), equity (23.308%), and well-being (22.056%) as mediating factors underscore the importance of developing comprehensive support systems. The complex interplay between these mediating variables significantly enhances the impact of internationalization strategies on both satisfaction and career development.

This study has several limitations. The geographical focus on Shandong Province, while providing valuable insights into one of China's largest provincial education systems, may not fully represent the diversity of Chinese provincial universities. The cross-sectional nature of the research limits our understanding of how internationalization strategies impact student outcomes over time. Additionally, the sample's focus on top-performing universities limits the generalizability of findings to institutions with different resource levels and international student populations.

These limitations point to several promising directions for future research. Studies examining multiple provinces could provide a more comprehensive understanding of regionalization effects on internationalization strategies. Longitudinal research would be valuable in tracking the evolution of strategy implementation and its long-term impacts on student outcomes. Investigation of specific cultural and regional factors could enhance understanding of context-specific challenges and opportunities. The emerging role of digital internationalization strategies, particularly in light of global changes in higher education delivery, presents another important area for investigation.

Conclusion

The HEI internationalization strategy demonstrates significant positive impacts on international students' experiences, with structural equation modeling revealing strong effects, particularly in student engagement (coefficient = 0.612), equity development (coefficient = 0.686), and well-being enhancement (coefficient = 0.714). The study reveals that mediating variables play a substantial role in translating internationalization strategies into concrete student outcomes, with combined mediating effects explaining over 60% of the total impact on both satisfaction and career development. Specifically, student engagement contributes 15.707% to satisfaction and 21.295% to career paths, equity accounts for 23.308% and 26.270% respectively, and well-being contributes 22.056% and 25.153%. These findings demonstrate that internationalization strategies' success significantly depends on their ability to enhance student engagement, ensure equitable treatment, and promote well-being.

Suggestion

To enhance international students' satisfaction and development, universities should embed internationalization deeply within their long-term development plans. This requires recruiting outstanding scholars with international backgrounds to enrich faculty composition, fostering diversified academic exchanges, and incorporating global perspectives into curriculum design. Universities should offer cutting-edge courses such as cross-cultural communication and international affairs, strengthening students' awareness and problem-solving abilities regarding global issues. Additionally, cooperation and exchange programs with internationally renowned universities are crucial for providing international students with opportunities for overseas study, research, and practical experiences.

Furthermore, HEIs must prioritize international students' well-being and sense of equity by fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. This includes optimizing accommodation conditions to ensure safe and comfortable living spaces, enhancing language support services to help students overcome barriers, and establishing dedicated psychological counseling services. In academic, living, and social activities, universities should guarantee that international students possess equal rights and opportunities as their domestic peers, fostering cross-cultural understanding and respect. Higher education institutions should provide customized career planning services tailored to students' professional backgrounds and interests while strengthening

collaborations with global enterprises to bridge the internship–employment gap. Through these comprehensive support services, HEIs can cultivate internationally competitive talents with global perspectives.

New Knowledge

This research advances the field through several significant contributions. First, it quantifies the relationship between internationalization strategies and student outcomes, revealing that mediating factors account for over 60% of the total effect. The effectiveness of these strategies heavily depends on their ability to enhance student engagement (15.707%), promote equity (23.308%), and improve well-being (22.056%).

Second, the strategic model proposed in this study is innovative in its integration of three key mediating variables – engagement, equity, and well-being – which have not been previously examined together in the Chinese higher education internationalization context. This comprehensive framework enables university administrators to better understand the pathways through which internationalization strategies influence student outcomes, particularly in provincial public universities where resources and international exposure may be more limited than in major metropolitan institutions.

The model enables planners of internationalization strategies in Chinese universities to enhance institutional competitiveness from multiple perspectives. By identifying the relative importance of different mediating factors, this research provides practical guidance for universities to prioritize their internationalization efforts and resource allocation. The findings suggest that focusing on equity and well-being aspects may yield better results in terms of student satisfaction and career development compared to traditional approaches that primarily emphasize academic programs and services.

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