

# *Changes in the Internationalization of Higher Education in the Post-epidemic Era*

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 epidemic has a wide and long-term impact on the world's politics, economy, education, and other fields to a certain extent. Higher education has faced additional obstacles in the post-epidemic age due to the strong-government governance style, the fundamental economic structure transformation, and the escalating social conflicts. By using the theory of government involvement in the field of education and the theory of internationalization of higher education, this paper analyzes the current situation of higher education development in Guangdong Province, China, and seeks to promote the high-quality development of higher education in the post-epidemic era. The findings indicate that while higher education develops more quickly in the post-epidemic age, its transition is still facing many new constraints. Therefore, there is a need to focus more on re-engineering the educational process based on popularization and internationalization, as well as adjusting the structure and direction of the globalization of higher education.

**Keywords:** post-epidemic era, government functions, higher education, internationalization

## 1. Introduction

Modern medicine was unprepared for the spread and mortality of the virus when COVID-19 suddenly broke out at the end of 2019. With the rapid spread of the epidemic throughout the world, the world economy quickly fell into a catastrophic recession, thus the era of the epidemic started. Later, the epidemic slowed down and stabilized in 2023, and people entered a post-epidemic era. In the post-epidemic era, significant changes have taken place in many fields, especially in higher education, which is closely linked to society. The impacts and changes triggered by the COVID-19 epidemic on higher education are the most direct, including some major and profound challenges. Many educational institutions were forced to close, and schools changed from offline teaching to online teaching. What is more, the flow of international students was restricted, and international education exports were facing greater downward pressure. Therefore, how international students attend classes is a thorny issue, and international exchanges and cooperation need to be strengthened. Meanwhile, the epidemic also creates an urgent demand for online education, representing a new growth point in education exports. Therefore, the government and education departments need to jointly take targeted and vigorous intervention measures to minimize the negative impact of the epidemic, promote the recovery of education exports, and achieve sustainable development in the post-epidemic era. This paper aims to explore how to further promote the nationalization of higher education in the post-pandemic era, and conclusions drawn from the analysis provide theoretical support and a practical

basis for the internationalization system of higher education, so as to further improve the policy system to respond to major epidemic outbreaks and offer guidance for universities at all levels and types to better carry out educational and teaching activities in the post epidemic era.

## **2. Research Background of the Internationalization of Higher Education under Government Power in the Post Epidemic Era**

From the perspective of historical development, there is a relatively close relationship between the evolution of government functions and economic and social development, but the tension between the two has been reflected in varying degrees in different periods. As a global public health emergency, the COVID-19 epidemic has many unknown risks and uncertainties that affect the results, posing a serious challenge to the governance system and capacity of governments. Therefore, changes will happen in the public administration development in response to the current situation, and the connection between the government, market, and society needs to be rebalanced. Higher education, which is closely related to society, requires more effective government intervention and macro planning and top-level design for its development.

Government is the primary organization that is responsible for developing the country's higher education internationalization strategy and increasing the national higher education system's global competitiveness by releasing regular, methodical strategic publications. For example, China has put forward clear instructions for international exchange and cooperation among universities according to the "National Medium and Long Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020)" [1]. Moreover, the internationalization of higher education is conducive to promoting the "double first-class" construction of universities [2]. Now that people have entered the post-epidemic era, the epidemic prevention and control measures in various countries around the world have expanded government power and improved social governance capabilities. However, not all governments are effective in implementing strategies. In some countries, universities have more autonomy. There are three forces involved in the internationalization of higher education, namely, the government, universities, and third-party institutions. The government does not play a decisive role, and its national strategy is more aimed at conveying basic positions, attitudes, and overall vision. It also promotes universities and third-party institutions to serve the country's political, diplomatic, and economic development through financial guidance, policy appeals, and the provision of immigration visas. For example, higher education in the United States has always been a product of multiple forces working together. The Constitution of the United States stipulates that the federal government does not have direct jurisdiction over higher education affairs, and universities, as independent legal organizations, have full autonomy in running schools [3]. Universities are primarily responsible for developing internationalization strategies based on their unique contexts. To achieve the internationalization of American higher education, a large number of universities have formed departments or working groups specifically responsible for internationalization concerns.

## **3. Survey on the Internationalization of Higher Education in Guangdong Province**

At present, China has become the world's largest exporter of overseas students, with self-funded overseas students being the most [4]. According to a poll, Shenzhen, a major city in Guangdong Province, China, plays an essential role in fostering educational internationalization. Shenzhen has signed framework agreements for regional cooperation with many countries and regions, including Warwick County in the United Kingdom, British Columbia Province in Canada, and Samara State in the Russian Federation. Despite the significant linguistic and cultural differences, there is a deep level of cooperation that promotes communication among the administration, schools, teachers, and students. Furthermore, the Shenzhen Municipal Education Bureau has created a stable cooperation

partnership with the education departments of Hong Kong and Macao in order to facilitate exchanges between principals, teachers, and students. Shenzhen's international education also has the special advantage of branding, as it is one of the first ports opened after the reform and opening up. In terms of brand presence, there are not only Chinese brands such as Country Garden but also famous international brands such as American brands Dalton, Synergy, Besses, etc. and British brands Harrow, Nordisk, Canterbury, etc. The highly market-oriented education market has further promoted the vitality of international education throughout Shenzhen.

A poll was also done in the capital city of Guangdong Province, Guangzhou. In the "14th Five Year Plan" for education development released on November 2, 2021, the Guangzhou Municipal Government proposed that by 2025, a total of no less than 50 international education window schools should be cultivated and established [5]. As of January 2023, there are 83 ordinary colleges and universities in Guangzhou, and there are 4 colleges and universities that are cooperatively run by China and foreign counties. In 2022, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou) was added. It is the first school that is cooperatively run by the mainland of China and Hong Kong with independent legal personality after the release of the Greater Bay Area Plan for Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao. As of now, there are ten Sino-foreign cooperative educational universities with independent legal personality, of which Guangdong holds half of the share. The other four schools are the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen), Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Shenzhen MSU-BIT University, and Guangdong Israel Institute of Technology. With the continuous support of policies, Guangzhou has become a new area where international education resources are concentrated. In addition, another important city, Dongguan, is also continuously improving the competitiveness of higher education internationalization. The City University of Hong Kong (Dongguan) has also approved the preparation for its establishment. To sum up, Guangdong has unique geographical advantages and plays a significant role in talents and resources.

One of the purposes of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China is to accelerate the construction of world-class universities and advantageous disciplines with Chinese characteristics, and comprehensively improve the quality of independent talent cultivation. To achieve these goals, there is a need to clearly understand the overall situation of the world today, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, and scientifically grasp the trend of higher education [6]. The development of China's higher education is a practical process of adhering to reform and innovation. International higher education research institutions officially released the 13th edition of QS World University Discipline Ranking on March 22, 2023. 71 universities in the Chinese Mainland were on the list. The number of universities on the list in China (mainland) was the largest in Asia, with 2 universities ranking in the top 15, 5 in the top 50, and 13 in the top 300 worldwide. In addition, the Chinese Mainland has 32 disciplines in the world's top 20, 7 more than in 2022. Peking University has 11 disciplines in the top 20 and Tsinghua University has 13. Tsinghua University ranks fifth in the world in the discipline of art history and the Chinese Mainland ranks first [7]. Despite the severe epidemic abroad, it was estimated that the number of students studying abroad globally would reach 60 million in 2021, an increase of more than 2.5 times over 2020 [8]. In the year of the most severe pandemic, 2020, the number of students studying abroad in Shanghai reached 253000, a year-on-year increase of 14.1%. This reality has compelled people to consider the practical gap between Chinese higher education and that of developed countries. The international education market is not only a driving force urging China to accelerate the pace of self-construction of higher education institutions but also an opportunity and a challenge that China has brought to higher education institutions in the global competition to cultivate high-tech talents.

## **4. New Ways to Accelerate the Internationalization of Higher Education in the Post-epidemic Era**

The ultimate goal of China's internationalization of higher education is to actively participate in the global governance of education, advance the change of global governance, and create a community with a common destiny for mankind. The internationalization of higher education is a systematic project that serves to ultimately achieve the rejuvenation of the country through higher education technology, satisfy the educational needs of society and citizens, and enhance international influence and competitiveness. The "Plan for Promoting the Cooperation and Development of Higher Education in the Guangdong Hong Kong Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA)" mentions that there will be several world-class universities built in the GBA by 2035. These universities will become an advanced model for the cooperation and innovative development of higher education, producing a series of original scientific achievements significantly impacting the development of world science and technology as well as the progress of human civilization [9].

### **4.1. Innovating Talent Cultivation Models and Clarifying the Direction of International Work**

The government should formulate a forward-looking overall plan and long-term goals for higher education development, build a good institutional environment, and respect the development laws of education. Innovation-driven development needs to be promoted, transformation and upgrading of cities and regions need to be achieved through connotation innovation, and the sustainability of university construction and talent cultivation needs to be enhanced. Colleges and universities should gradually move closer to leading international universities, build an international talent education system, and establish an international talent cultivation concept, striving to cultivate students with an international perspective and clarifying the direction of international work from various aspects such as university spirit, culture, academia, and atmosphere.

### **4.2. Accelerating the Development of International Cooperation**

Internationalization is an unavoidable option for higher education under globalization. The formulation of higher education policies and the construction of high-level universities need an international perspective to draw on and summarize the experience of international high-level higher education development and cooperation. Furthermore, the international production and cultural exchange functions of higher education must be prioritized to deepen the connotation of higher education's international development.

### **4.3. Improving the Institutional Safeguards for the GBA**

Guangdong has a special geographical location. It is located in the GBA. To provide strong legal protection for close cooperation in education among these three regions, it is necessary to establish a guarantee mechanism for education regulations and an entity coordination organization to bridge institutional differences among the three regions. Moreover, a mutual support and guarantee mechanism should also be built for the education regulation system of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, thus strengthening collaboration between governments. Regarding the joint training of graduate students, applicants must enter Hong Kong and Macao within the prescribed time period to obtain a degree, which not only increases the economic cost of returning to Hong Kong and Macao for applicants but also the cost of learning time in disguised form. At the same time, it is difficult to effectively integrate the teacher resources in the three regions. Therefore, it is necessary to establish

a multi-channel, multi-level, and institutionalized education cooperation and coordination mechanism in the Bay Area to solve the key barriers to education development.

#### 4.4. Highlighting the Characteristic Development of Internationalization of Higher Education

Promoting the integration and development of higher education in the GBA is not only an essential support for the economic, social, and technological innovation development of this region but also a great attempt to reform and develop regional education in the context of “one country, two systems”. It is also a key measure and practical demand for achieving China’s education modernization and establishing a highland for education in the south [10]. Joint higher education institutions and enterprises should not only maintain and promote traditional advantages, but also establish educational demonstration features that reflect the spirit and value of the GBA based on its strategic positioning and economic and social needs.

### 5. Conclusion

Today’s world is undergoing significant changes that have not occurred in a century. In the post-epidemic age, China’s reform and transformation of higher education globalization faces numerous new problems. Meanwhile, China’s connotative development, which focuses on the quality of higher education, is still in its exploratory stage, as it is in Guangdong. Duke University believes that the primary responsibility of a university is to attract, retain, and cultivate outstanding teachers with strong intelligence and creativity, while stimulating and supporting students’ creative enthusiasm [11]. Guangdong can also establish higher education demonstration schools that stimulate the vitality of education with the goals of cultivating new students, encouraging new teaching and research systems, taking solving social problems as educational orientation, and striving to establish the “Talent Bay Area” brand internationally through the construction of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao higher education hub.

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