



From Metrics to Sustainability: Internationalization Practices of Higher Education Institutions in Northern Luzon, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: In response to an increasingly interconnected global landscape, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are continuously advancing their connections and responsiveness through pursuing internationalization. This study investigates the operationalization of internationalization practices within public and private HEIs in Northern Luzon, Philippines, focusing on the core dimensions that facilitate institutional resilience and global competitiveness.

Methodology: Adopting exploratory multiple-case study design, this study investigated internationalization practices across seven purposively selected HEIs in Northern Luzon, Philippines. Data triangulation involved semi-structured key informant interviews with high-level administrators, specifically, vice presidents, directors and leads of International Relations Offices (IROs), and a comprehensive document review through Thematic Analysis. These institutions were selected based on their sustained performance and upward Global ranking trajectories, providing a high-performance context for analyzing best practices in global integration.

Main Findings: The findings indicate that regional HEIs utilize a strategic selectivity approach, emphasizing high-impact international memberships and trust-based partnerships as the primary drivers for sustaining mobility, collaborative research, and transnational education. These practices are integrated into the fundamental structure of the institution through a decentralized soft infrastructure, which includes specialized international centers and virtual exchange platforms that add global standards to the local curriculum while preserving indigenous knowledge intact. This operational approach ultimately enables a shift from a focus on quantitative metrics to a socially responsible, resource-aligned framework that democratizes global competence for students.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study addresses a critical gap in internationalization literature by employing multi-case study research design to investigate underrepresented public and private HEIs in Northern Luzon, Philippines. Through this, the study captures diverse spectrum of internationalization practices offering evidence-based roadmap for regional HEIs to align capacity with global standards. It provides a novel methodological framework for understanding how localized institutions transition into active participants in global knowledge exchange.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At present, internationalization has emerged as a core thrust, serving as a strategic response in higher education to the pressures and opportunities driven by globalization, aiming to enhance academic quality,

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economic competitiveness, and global engagement. Globally, over 90% of the 907 HEIs from 126 countries mention “internationalization” in their ultimate objective and strategic plan, largely with institutional support and grants from international organizations and government agencies. Internationalization's biggest benefit is enhanced international cooperation and capacity building and improved quality of teaching and learning [1]. This institutional shift is underscored by demographic projections; the global higher education student population is expected to surge from 230 million in 2019 to 600 million by 2040, dramatically expanding the scale of international student mobility [2]. Consequently, internationalization is no longer viewed as a static goal but as a dynamic, intentional process essential for institutional credibility and societal relevance [3].

Effective internationalization requires a systematic approach, often modeled by Knight’s internationalization cycle, which emphasizes a continuous progression from awareness and commitment to operationalization and review [4], [5]. Modern frameworks differentiate between two interdependent pillars: “internationalization at home,” which fosters global competencies through curriculum and virtual engagement, and “cross-border education,” involving the physical mobility of students, faculty, and programs [6]. The international dimension is a key factor in shaping and challenging the higher education sector in countries all over the world. This is why educational leaders are now exploring ways and means to find out how internationalization can advance their institution [6], [7].

In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has reinforced this movement through Memorandum Order No. 55, s. 2016, which encourages HEIs to adopt a holistic approach aligned with ASEAN and UNESCO frameworks [8]. Philippine HEIs have demonstrated significant ambition, ranking within the top 60 globally for innovation and training, with strategies increasingly focused on producing globally competitive, locally responsive graduates [9]. However, success is largely dictated by internal drivers, specifically senior leadership and international offices, which act as catalysts for articulating vision and fostering the collaborative environments necessary for sustainable engagement [10], [11].

Despite these national strides, implementation remains uneven due to varying institutional accreditation levels, organizational infrastructure, and budget allocations [12]. Research indicates that many initiatives remain preoccupied with quantitative metrics, such as rankings and mobility counts, which can overlook the importance of meaningful intercultural exchange and societal impact [13]. Furthermore, while global standards often reflect Western academic paradigms, there is a growing need for practices and strategies that prioritize diversity, mutual respect, and the inclusion of local knowledge and cultural traditions [3], [14].

Currently, a notable research gap exists concerning a holistic framework that facilitates equitable international collaboration, specifically adapted to the unique regional context of Philippine HEIs. Although research has examined readiness in regions such as the Southeastern Philippines [14], empirical evidence pertaining to the northern areas is still underrepresented and limited.

While existing empirical work has mapped internationalization in metropolitan centers like Manila and regional hubs in the South [14], the distinct socio-economic and geographic challenges of Northern Luzon HEIs, particularly their integration of indigenous knowledge systems remain a significant empirical blind spot. This fills the gap by investigating the current internationalization practices of HEIs in Northern Luzon across eight (8) dimensions, specifically: institutional memberships and partnerships, mobility programs, international community, international research, internationalized curriculum and learning, transnational education programs; international center; and community engagement.

The findings offer useful, evidence-based insights for administrators and policymakers of HEIs who wish to pursue internationalization to strengthen strategic alignment, augment institutional capacity, and foster inclusive and globally relevant higher education, thereby strengthen the role of regional HEIs as active participants in global knowledge exchange and local societal advancement. Through this, the study captures diverse spectrum of internationalization practices offering evidence-based roadmap for regional HEIs to align capacity with global standards. It provides a novel methodological framework specifically the use of multiple-case study design for understanding how localized institutions transition into active participants in global knowledge exchange. Therefore, this study employs a multiple-case study design to evaluate the operationalization of these dimensions within the specific context of Northern Luzon.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the operationalization of these dimensions within the specific context of Northern Luzon. Specifically, the research seeks to answer: How are the internationalization practices of regional HEIs operationalized and integrated across the eight core dimensions?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed qualitative research, specifically an exploratory multiple-case study design, to generate an in-depth understanding of the contemporary internationalization practices of higher education institutions (HEIs). This exploratory approach is particularly suited for investigating contemporary institutional

processes where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined [15]. By treating each of the seven participating HEIs as a distinct unit of analysis, the researcher was able to perform a cross-case synthesis of how internationalization is conceptualized, operationalized, and sustained across selected HEIs, while capturing the contextual dynamics that shape these practices.

2.2. Locale and Population

The study was conducted in Northern Luzon, Philippines, specifically targeting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within Region I and the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). These regions were strategically chosen as the locale of the study, as they consistently advanced or maintained their ranks in prestigious international rankings. These regions exemplify a commitment to the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizing sustainable and quality education. With the highest number of globally recognized HEIs, Region I and CAR provided an ideal context for investigating the internationalization practices of seven HEIs, aligning with the study's objectives.

A purposive case sampling approach was employed to select institutions that could serve as "information-rich" cases regarding successful internationalization. The inclusion criteria required HEIs to have secured and maintained positions in prestigious global rankings specifically the Times Higher Education (THE) or the World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI) for at least two consecutive years (2024 and 2025). This criterion ensured that the practices explored were grounded in established, internationally validated frameworks.

Participants were selected using purposive expert sampling, focusing on the key players of institutional internationalization. Each of the seven HEIs were represented by vice presidents, directors, or leads responsible for International Relations Offices, excluding those from offices such as Research and Extension, Curriculum and Instruction, or Student Affairs as participants or key informant interviewees. In this study, administrators, specifically one (1) Vice President, five (5) directors and (1) one lead of international relations offices, were chosen as participants because they are the primary drivers of internationalization. They play a crucial role in formulating and implementing internationalization policies and initiatives, significantly contributing to their institutions' global rankings and sustained commitment to both local and international advancement. Through their experiences and perspectives, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the practices and strategies of HEIs in internationalization.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

There were two (2) instruments used in the study: semi-structured key informant interviews (KII) and documents to comprehensively explore the internationalization practices of HEIs in Northern Luzon, Philippines. The semi-structured interview questions was developed by the researcher to capture nuanced qualitative data. The development process was grounded in the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) evaluation and monitoring tools for internationalization. The instrument consists of 19 core questions categorized into eight (8) critical areas of internationalization: institutional memberships and partnerships, mobility programs, international community integration, international research, internationalized curriculum and learning, transnational education (TNE) programs, international centers, and community engagement.

The instrument was validated by three (3) experts; the Former Regional Director of CHED Region one (1); a Focal person of Internationalization and Education Supervisor II of CHED Region one (1); and a Director of International Relations Office in a LUC in Northern Luzon, Philippines. The experts assessed the tool using a five-point validation scale where a score of 5 (Completely Valid) indicates that 80%–100% of the items are appropriate and relevant; 4 (Highly Valid) represents 60%–79%; 3 (Moderately Valid) represents 40%–59%; 2 (Slightly Valid) represents 20%–39%; and 1 (Not Valid) indicates that less than 20% of the items are appropriate. The content validity results obtained an overall rating of 4.83, indicating complete validity. The evaluators' qualitative comments and suggestions were then used to improve the content and technical accuracy of the interview questions before they were administered.

As for the second instrument, coding manuals was used through obtaining copies of institutional policies and strategic internationalization (SIP) uploaded in HEIs' websites. However out of seven (7) HEIs, only five (5) of the HEIs granted the researcher access to the copies of operations manual and SIPs.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured Ethics Clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee to ensure that the study consistently assesses vulnerability, the recruitment process, and the procedures for obtaining informed consent within the context of the study protocol and the participants. Subsequently, permission was obtained from the presidents of target higher education institutions (HEIs) in Regions I and the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), Northern Luzon, Philippines, to conduct key informant interviews (KIIs) with Vice Presidents, Directors, and Leads of International Relations Offices (IROs). Informed consent was explicitly obtained from all seven participants, who were briefed on the study's objectives, methods, risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw without repercussions; confidentiality was ensured through

data anonymization (via coding and pseudonyms), secure storage accessible only to the researcher, and restricted access to audio recordings and transcriptions. Interviews, lasting 60–95 minutes, were conducted in participant-preferred comfortable settings—five face-to-face and two online—to foster detailed responses.

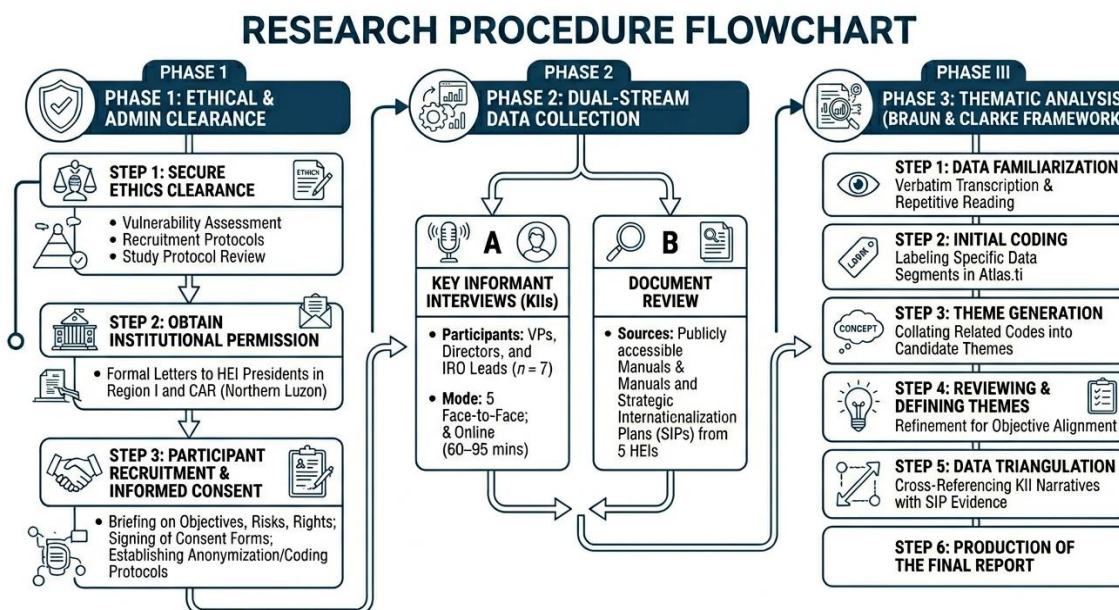


Figure 1. Research Procedure Flowchart

Complementing the KIIs, document review involved analyzing publicly accessible operations manuals and Strategic Internationalization Plans (SIPs) from five HEIs that granted access, enabling data triangulation for enhanced credibility. Qualitative data from KIIs and documents were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's [15] six-phase thematic analysis framework, supported by Atlas.ti software: this entailed data familiarization, initial and advanced coding, theme generation, review, and refinement to ensure systematic data management.

The process commenced with data familiarization, involving verbatim transcription and repetitive reading of the SIPs to note initial insights. This was followed by generating initial codes, where specific data segments were labeled. These codes were then collated during the theme generation phase, where related codes were grouped under the candidate theme (shown in table 1). During the reviewing and defining phases, the researcher refined these themes to ensure they accurately represented the dataset, ultimately defining the theme as the formalization of international recognition through policy-backed mandates. This rigorous refinement ensured that each theme directly addressed the research objectives. Finally, the analysis culminated in the production of the report. To enhance the credibility of these findings, data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing the KII narratives with the documentary evidence found in the accessible SIPs, ensuring that reported practices were explored.

Table 1. Sample Initial Coding and Theme Development

Raw Data Excerpt (KII)	Initial Code	Category	Theme
“We first apply for annual membership to test if the partnership works before committing long-term.”	Risk-mitigation strategy	Partnership Strategy	International Memberships & Partnerships
“Virtual mobility and COIL are now our main tools for internationalization.”	Adoption of virtual mobility	Learning Modality	Mobility Programs

Example of Coding Process (Excerpt)

A segment of the interview transcript was analyzed following the six-phase framework of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke [15].

Raw Extract:

“We are not actually counting the number of partnerships, but we focus on the depth and sustainability of each collaboration.”

- Initial Code: Quality-over-quantity partnerships
- Axial Code/Category: Strategic partnership evaluation

- Theme: International Memberships and Partnerships

This process was repeated across all transcripts, where similar codes were clustered into broader categories and eventually synthesized into eight overarching themes reflecting institutional internationalization practices.

2.5. Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, the study adhered to established qualitative criteria of trustworthiness, including credibility through data triangulation, cross-referencing KII narratives with SIPs, as well as analyst triangulation, where peer researchers conduct a thematic audit, where they cross-examined the initial codes against the raw transcripts to ensure interpretive fit. The peer researchers involve IRO Director (Administrative), English Instructor (Linguistic), and Research Director (Methodology) reviewed and validated the coding structures and generated themes to mitigate individual bias. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through a systematic audit trail in ATLAS.ti, which chronologically documented the progression from raw transcripts to the final thematic map, supplemented by member checking from to allow informants to validate thematic interpretations. Transferability was addressed by providing rich contextual descriptions to enable readers to assess applicability to similar higher education settings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the KII narratives and SIPs, there were eight (8) categories which served as the main themes of the study with its corresponding sub-themes shown in Figure 2.

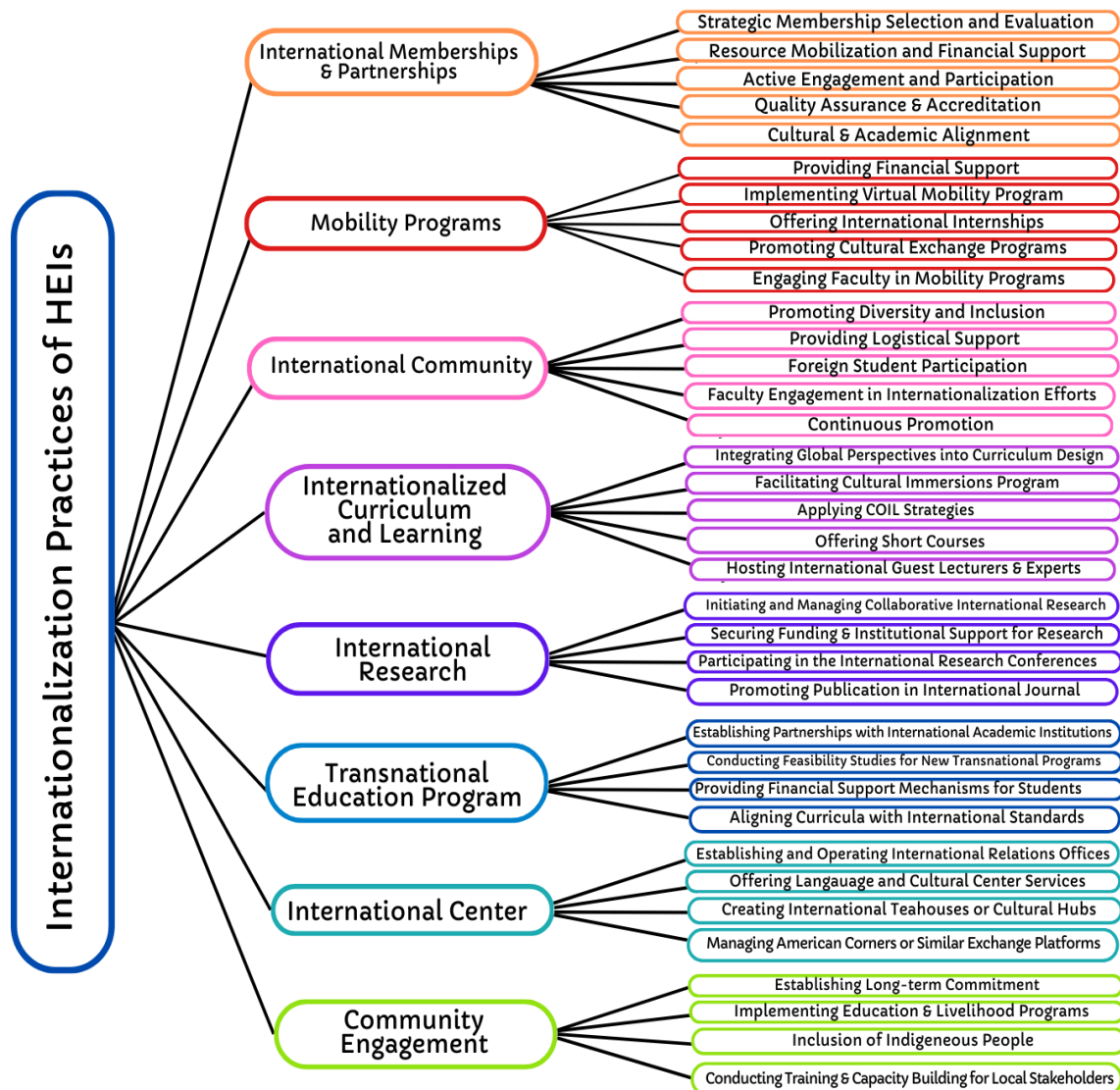


Figure 2. Thematic Diagram on the Internationalization Practices of HEIs

3.1. International Memberships and Partnerships

The sustainability of internationalization initiatives within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is fundamentally anchored in the strategic orchestration of international memberships and partnerships. The results reveal that HEIs sustain internationalization based not only on the number of external ties but through calculated, multi-dimensional integration of strategic membership selection and evaluation, resource mobilization and financial support, and quality benchmarking. The transition from “testing the waters” through the short-term options to securing lifetime memberships indicates a risk-mitigation strategy designed to assess if they are compatible before committing to long-term memberships and partnerships. This selective strategy is supported by a resource mobilization that leverages a consortia-based funding and coordinated logistical support to maintain high-cost activities such as faculty mobility and collaborative projects, reducing the financial burden on individual institutions. Furthermore, international accreditation and rankings such as AUN-QA, QS rankings, WURI, and THE with active participation signals that HEIs utilize these partnerships as mechanisms for both quality assurance and global brand credibility. Lastly, the sustainability of these initiatives depends on cultural and academic alignment, with proactive cultural sensitivity training acting as a structural safeguard to preserve the relational integrity of cross-border collaborations. HEIs noted:

"if we are not yet ready, the university will first take the annual option to test the waters, and later... apply for the lifetime membership."

"We're not actually counting the numbers, but we're really into the depth and breadth of the partnerships that we have."

"The networks are very important because they consist of consortia... so they can just sponsor other trips or other activities."

"We maintain partnership if we have the same vision; if we have activities done already."

"We have internationalization rules because we are joining QS, WURI et cetera."

"Cultural sensitivity is crucial in our partnerships; it helps us navigate challenges and build stronger relationships."

3.2. Mobility Programs

The heterogeneity of mobility initiatives in HEIs signifies a strategic transition toward a comprehensive internationalization paradigm that formalizes global competency through both virtual and experiential modalities. Empirical observations reveal that by integrating financial subsidies with faculty-led engagement, institutions move beyond descriptive participation to create a systemic, sustainable framework for institutionalized scholarly exchange. Specifically, the data suggests that the optimization of external funding serves as a mechanism for socioeconomic inclusivity, making international experiences possible for students while saving the institutional fund. Further, the use of virtual mobility and online collaborative learning (COIL) institutionalizes “home-based internationalization” by ensuring global connections continue despite travel restrictions. By offering international internships, universities provide students with real-world work experience in global settings. HEIs also invest in faculty training abroad, ensuring that teachers bring global expertise back to their classrooms. HEIs expressed:

"...it helps universities too, as they won't have to pay tuition when students get scholarships. Association will shoulder the tuition fee"

"Now, we're banking on virtual mobility. It's trendy now in the global educational landscape... COIL—Collaborative Online International Learning is trendy, along with webinars and virtual mobility."

"We have been participating in the SEA Teacher Project... Our faculty members are frequently invited to deliver talks and training sessions."

"Currently, there is an ongoing online global cultural exchange program."

"For example, we had a faculty member who participated in a mobility program with Arizona State University... We also had a teacher who went for training in the US through regional English Language Office..."

3.3. International Community

By transitioning from passive hosting to active cultivation of an internationalized campus ecosystem, HEIs sustain their internationalization initiatives. Based on the results, this was achieved through the strategic integration of four core practices aimed at institutionalizing global diversity and relational sustainability. HEIs utilized diversity not merely as a social value but as a strategic performance indicator. By deliberately fostering

inclusive environment for all community members, particularly marginalized groups, including the LGBTQIA+ community and by expanding breadth of nationalities representing twenty-seven (27) distinct backgrounds, institutions align their internal culture with global ranking parameters such as QS and THE. The findings also indicate logistical support, including accommodations, meals for short stays, and reliable local transportation-functions as the critical “soft infrastructure” for internationalization. These practices are not viewed as mere hospitality but strategic way to ensure seamless integration increases institutional loyalty among international stakeholders. HEIs have stopped employing traditional broad-scale marketing and are now using organic recruitment ecosystems. Through Alumni word-of-mouth referrals and targeting institutional partnerships with key markets like Nigeria, China, etc., HEIs use relational marketing to ensure steady stream of students in their institutions. Despite current accolades such as QS stars, THE, WURI and other international recognitions and accreditations, HEIs constantly adapt their marketing strategies. The move of turning “campus life” into digital content and social media stories shows a move toward sustained global visibility and market competitiveness.

“We have 27 nationalities, but at least through this, we have an increasing number of nationalities, and increasing number of international students.”

“For inbound students arriving to us, we provide accommodation... We also provide them with decent accommodation”

“Our marketing strategy for international students primarily depends on optimizing word-of-mouth referrals from our graduates”

“We send faculty members from that school here to pursue master's or PhD programs, thanks to these partnerships.”

“Although we can already claim that the university has achieved 3 QS Stars, we now prioritize promoting and advertising the university through our social media platforms”

“We are also concentrating on producing engaging content that illustrates our campus life and the experiences of our international students.”

3.4. Internationalized Curriculum & Learning

The internationalization of the curriculum and learning processes is a critical institutional practice; however, its sustainability is contingent upon shifting from peripheral mobility toward a holistic internationalization of the curriculum (IoC), characterized by four primary strategic practices. Central to this is alignment of curricula with global imperatives, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which serves to institutionalize global responsibility as a core learning outcome regardless of physical mobility. This is supported by experiential and regional immersion frameworks, which transition students from theoretical knowledge to cultural competency through structured programs like the SEA Teacher initiative of SEAMEO. Furthermore, HEIs employ COIL as a method of “Internationalization at Home”, through participating in collaborative classroom environments with international peers provide students with significant insights and experiences that enrich their educational outcomes. This is complemented by the modularization of learning through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and short-course offerings, which allow for the acquisition of micro-credentials and specialized language skills. By embedding esteemed global scholars into the local academic environment, HEIs facilitate immediate knowledge exchange and collaborative learning, ensuring that the curriculum is continuously enriched by diverse international perspectives and high-level global expertise. Participants noted:

“In globalized curricula, that's already in our strategic plan, so they have no choice either. There is a specific objective for this, which is outlined in Goal 1 of the university: ‘to integrate an internationalization perspective towards global connectedness.’”

“We have the SEA Teacher Program... was embedded into our curriculum. We do it almost every year”.

“In our program, Internalized Globalizing Our Curricula, we facilitate COIL with Indonesia, concentrating on criminology in a shared classroom environment.”

“... because we integrated Massive Open Online Courses in our General Education and major courses”

“These micro-credentials are not just badges; they represent real skills that employers are looking for in a globalized job market.”

“Incorporating international experts enables our students to interact with advanced research and practices that are generally absent in our local context.”

3.5. International Research

As reflected in most global ranking frameworks, international research is a core pillar of HEI efforts to advancing internationalization. Based on the results, HEIs have transitioned toward managed collaborative international research projects. This is evidenced by the strategic use of Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) and Understanding (MOU), which act as structural anchors to counteract limitations to decentralized research and single-authorship. HEIs perceived the development of high-quality, externally-sponsored proposals as one of the most significant strategies for capacity building. This strategic focus transforms research from an individual pursuit into an institutionalized mechanism for securing global funding such as publication fees and registration costs and attracting high-tier academic talents. To align with the global ranking metrics such as the QS Ranking and THE, HEIs have established a culture of incentivizing scholarly outputs by providing subsidies for publication fees and conference registrations. This helps them get their work published in high-impact, indexed international journals. This strategic promotion of indexed research serves as a dual-purpose lever: it enhances institutional visibility and reputation while ensuring compliance with global benchmarks for academic excellence. The following excerpts illustrate this transition from observation to proactive collaborative engagement:

“That’s one of the core content of our MOUs... That’s our way of promoting collaboration.”

“Because of the Joint Circular on research, single authorship is discouraged in favor of collaborative research.”

“...usually in our institution, research is well-supported and well-funded, but it will always depend on the proposal.”

“We give subsidies to our partners from international communities who want to join research initiatives.”

“The research office is also very proactive in pursuing international research collaborations. Just recently, we had two meetings with two Indonesian university partners to map out research collaborations.”

“We’re still in the observation stage for now. We’re looking at what international institutions are doing. Our current focus is still on international publications.”

3.6. Transnational Education Programs

Governed by the regulatory framework of the Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) Act, institutions have adopted phased strategy for global expansion that prioritizes long-term academic integration over simple program delivery. These TNEs aimed at encouraging international cooperation and information sharing and offer students access to programs that are recognized in other countries. The findings suggest a deliberate shift toward a prudential expansion strategy, where internationalization is treated as a calculated investment rather than a mere cross-border transaction. Evidently, the use of feasibility studies as a diagnostic tool to align institutional capacity with global demand, ensuring that the economic viability of offering new programs. Sustainability is further anchored in inter-organizational coalitions (e.g., British Council and CHED), which serve as conduits for resource sharing and international accreditation. Furthermore, the findings reveal a transitional financial architecture, where initial subsidies and scholarship mechanisms are utilized as market-entry tools to build student cohorts before shifting toward self-sustaining models. Finally, the focus on internal quality alignment indicates that HEIs view TNE not merely as an outward expansion, but as a mechanism for upgrading domestic academic rigor to meet global benchmarks.

“This is in partnership with the British Council, the Commission on Higher Education, universities in the Philippines, and universities in the UK.”

“Another one is a feasibility study before even starting so that we know if there are takers.”

“Although the first years are under scholarship, in order to maintain it, the scholarship will mean eventually, of course, there will be no scholarship”

“We need to prioritize improving our internal quality before we can pursue [TNHE].”

3.7. International Centers

Establishing international centers has also one of the indicators of sustainable internationalization specifically, specialized physical and administrative infrastructures. Evidence shows that HEIs have transformed from decentralized international activities to a centralized governance model by setting up International Relations Offices (IROs). These offices are the main hubs for global engagement. They provide the professionalized human capital, that include dedicated directors and mobility coordinators, that is needed to

handle the complexities of partnerships across borders. This formalization of the structure makes sure that internationalization is not merely a temporary endeavor but a permanent, managed part of the institution.

Beyond administrative oversight, HEIs utilized spatial strategies to promote socio-cultural integration and academic assistance. The creation of Language and Cultural Centers serves as a linguistic mediation strategy, equipping students with the necessary communicative skills for global mobility such as public speaking and related course offerings. The establishment of "International Teahouses" and "Cultural Hubs" exemplifies a strategic spatial intervention aimed at developing "soft infrastructure"—secure, informal settings that promote the natural exchange of cultural capital between local and international students. Moreover, by hosting externally funded platforms like "American Corners," HEIs engage in collaborative diplomacy, using partnerships with global agencies (like the US Embassy) to make resources more accessible and enhance the prestige of their institutions.

Excerpts from the KII reveal:

"The IRO is very important for managing our international partnerships and making sure our programs meet global standards."

"The International Language Center helps students improve their English skills so they can take advantage of global opportunities."

"The International Teahouse is a place for students to meet and feel at home, which helps them feel like they belong."

"The American Corner is a treasure trove of information and resources that encourages cultural exchange."

3.8. Community Engagement

The integration of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) into the global landscape is increasingly substantiated by their capacity to translate international standards into significant local social interventions. The data analysis reveals that institutions have transcended conventional academic boundaries to embrace a model of Socially Responsible Internationalization, wherein community engagement serves as the empirical evidence of an institution's global mission. Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) are a key aspect of this practice because they make long-term partnerships formalized. These documents serve as tools for governance that turn occasional outreach into institutionalized obligations. This makes sure that the trust and long-term accountability needed to keep cross-border projects going in local settings are in place.

Moreover, HEIs employ inclusive empowerment frameworks that combines international mandates with the realities of marginalized groups. The implementation of livelihood and education initiatives—specifically aimed at LGBTQIA+ and Indigenous (IP) communities—functions as a knowledge-transfer mechanism that transforms global academic expertise into local socio-economic resources. This is made even better by strategic capacity building for local government, where HEIs act as institutional advisors to local government units (LGUs). Excerpts from the participants:

"We consistently refer back to the Memorandum of Agreement to ensure that we fulfill our commitments."

"We have adopted [from] one institution in... students taught at home moms... on bread and pastries."

"We involve all of these communities, even the IP community... we have international activities on IP that we involve them."

"We have extension programs focusing on the political leaders of the province... that seems to be the only current activity."

The internationalization practices of HEIs in Northern Luzon, Philippines demonstrate a strategic and resource-aligned approach to improving global engagement and competitiveness. As reflected in the results of the study, this transition mirrors the global shift toward qualitative, depth-oriented partnerships rather than purely quantitative metrics. By utilizing risk-mitigation strategies such as "testing the waters" with annual memberships before committing to long-term partnerships—these institutions demonstrate what scholars define as sophisticated institutional maturity in an evolving global landscape [16]. This kind of strategic selectivity is similar to recent studies of Southeast Asian universities that have moved toward Internationalization at Home (IaH) to get around geographic and financial problems [17], [18]. The integration of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and virtual exchange functions as the main strategy for fostering global competence despite travel limitations [17], [19], [20].

In synthesis, the internationalization practices are very closely aligned with the national regulatory frameworks, specifically CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 55, s. 2016 [7]. These institutions show that internationalization now goes beyond traditional cross-border mobility by establishing intentional partnerships and building inclusive international communities. It has become an essential component of teaching, research, governance, and social responsibility [18], [21]. This is in line with the "push-pull" factors and mobility determinants seen in larger regional studies [19], [21]. This comprehensive view suggests that prioritizing quality assurance and cultural alignment at the forefront can help regional higher education institutions become more competitive on a global scale while also meeting local development goals [22], [23].

Theoretically, the inclusion of global benchmarks such as QS, THE, WURI into local curricula and research practices indicates a decentralization of regional HEIs [22], [24]-[26]. Instead of merely taking in global knowledge, these institutions employ specialized international centers and "soft infrastructure" to create a localized global ecosystem [21]. The shift corresponds with the growing debates about Socially Responsible Internationalization (SRI) and decolonizing points of view. For example, extension programs are purposefully including indigenous people (IP) and marginalized communities [20], [27], [28]. Additionally, the shift towards managed, collaborative research initiatives, supported by institutional subsidies for indexed publications, represents a strategic endeavor to address the historical "underestimation" of faculty contributions to global engagement [11], [13], [16], [29].

This study has educational significance as it empirically demonstrates how regional HEIs can integrate global citizenship competencies into the domestic curriculum [30]. It outlines the specific "practices and preparations" of regional institutions, offering a scalable framework for other underrepresented higher education institutions to synchronize institutional capacity with global benchmarks [14], [30]. However, the primary limitation of this exploratory multiple-case study is its primary focus on the Northern Luzon context, which may not adequately represent the comprehensive diversity of institutional challenges faced by universities in other ASEAN sub-regions. This study examines institutional governance and faculty engagement; however, further research may utilize long-term methodologies to assess the lasting impact of these internationalized curricula on student career paths within a globalized labor market.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence of a critical paradigm shift within regional HEIs, where internationalization has transitioned from a peripheral administrative mandate to a central pedagogical driver. The data shows that higher education institutions (HEIs) in Northern Luzon have successfully put in place a strategic, resource-aligned approach that directly incorporates global citizenship into the curriculum and teaching design in the Philippines. Establishing international memberships and partnerships is a core dimension of this shift. These partnerships are the building blocks for pursuing and maintaining core areas including mobility programs, internationalized learning, and collaborative research. These HEIs are democratizing global competence by creating specialized international centers that protect indigenous knowledge and promote inclusive global communities. This elevates global competence from an elite privilege for mobile cohorts to a standard educational outcome for all students.

Furthermore, this study serves as a definitive benchmark reference for institutional leaders and policymakers. It offers a strategic roadmap for identifying institutional bottlenecks and advancing academic horizons through purposeful internationalization. This strategy allows regional HEIs to pursue a model of engagement that is simultaneously competitive on a global scale and deeply relevant to the local community. Ultimately, the study concludes that true sustainability in internationalization is achieved when global benchmarks are balanced with social responsibility and the preservation of regional identity.

Although this study offers significant practical contributions, the findings are confined to qualitative insights and documentary evidence, excluding quantitative metrics from recognized global ranking systems. Thus, additional studies should aim to employ a mixed-methods approach to integrate qualitative insights with quantitative performance metrics. Furthermore, given that this study concentrated mainly on the administrative perspective, future investigations should include lived experiences and perspectives of faculty, support personnel, students, and external stakeholders to provide an in-depth analysis. Finally, this research examined the internationalization practices of HEIs, but future researchers should explore specific institutional policies and governance frameworks that facilitate these practices. They should also look at the challenges faced and the long-term benefits to the university ecosystem.

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