

# Internationalization at Home in Higher Vocational Education within the Context of Building China into a Leading Country in Education: Connotation and Promotion Strategies

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**Abstract:** The goal of building China into a leading country in education imposes strategic requirements for the high-quality development of Higher Vocational Education (HVE). This paper focuses on Internationalization at Home (IaH) in HVE, aiming to elucidate how it effectively serves the construction of a leading country in education through localized practices. The study first clarifies the paradigm shift of IaH from cross-border mobility to local integration, along with its core characteristics of integrating vocational nature and inclusivity within the vocational education context. Furthermore, from the strategic level of building a leading country in education, it profoundly discusses the triple value implications of IaH: firstly, promoting educational equity through inclusive intercultural cultivation, thereby implementing the people-oriented educational philosophy; secondly, significantly enhancing the quality of technical and skilled talent training by introducing international high-quality resources and technical standards, strengthening talent support; and thirdly, facilitating national high-level opening-up and global competitiveness enhancement by serving the internationalization of regional industries. In response to current practical challenges, this paper proposes a three-dimensional strategy involving strengthened policy guidance, improved institutional implementation mechanisms, and deepened cross-border integration, offering insights for constructing an internationalization model of vocational education with Chinese characteristics and empowering the building of a leading country in education.

**Keywords:** building a leading country in education; internationalization at home (IaH); higher vocational education (HVE); promotion strategies

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## 1. Introduction

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) proposed building China into a leading country in education by 2035. As the main front for cultivating high-quality technical and skilled talents, Higher Vocational Education (HVE) is indispensable in this endeavor. Internationalization at Home (IaH), as an emerging model of internationalization in recent years, has attracted increasing attention from researchers. By providing intercultural training for all students within the local context, IaH effectively addresses the limitations of traditional cross-border mobility internationalization, such as high costs and limited reach<sup>[1]</sup>. It tackles the trends of elitism and commercialization associated with traditional internationalization both theoretically and practically<sup>[2]</sup>, promotes educational equity, and emphasizes a

return to the original essence of internationalization in higher education<sup>[3]</sup>. Against the backdrop of building China into a leading country in education, IaH will assist HVE in effectively utilizing world-class educational resources and innovative elements, thereby supporting China's efforts. Therefore, in-depth exploration of how IaH empowers the construction of a leading country in education, clarifying its connotations and proposing corresponding promotion strategies, shows significant theoretical importance and practical urgency.

## 2. Internationalization at Home in Higher Vocational Education: Connotation

The concept of Internationalization at Home (IaH) was first proposed by Bengt Nilsson (1999), Vice President of International Affairs at Malmö University, Sweden. This emerged from the observation that the EU's Erasmus Programme aimed to fund 10% of students for cross-border educational activities but consistently failed to meet this target. Nilsson recognized the limited coverage of mobility-dominated internationalization and argued that the majority of students unable to travel abroad should also have the opportunity to receive intercultural training, leading him to advocate for IaH. He defined it as any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student mobility<sup>[4]</sup>. Wächter (2003) suggested that Nilsson's concept was built on two foundations: an understanding of internationalization beyond mobility and an emphasis on teaching and learning in an intercultural environment<sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, IaH is implemented on the local campus, targeting both students with and without the means for cross-border mobility, embodying an inclusive characteristic that helps promote educational equity. Knight (2004) categorized internationalization into cross-border education and IaH<sup>[6]</sup>, where IaH encompasses various activities such as intercultural curricula, teaching methods, learning activities, and academic cooperation<sup>[7]</sup>. Beelen and Jones (2015) argued that placing the curriculum alongside other activities underestimated its role; they posited that the curriculum should be the core of IaH. They redefined IaH as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments"<sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, the core content of IaH is the curriculum, connecting all students through formal classroom-based courses and informal extracurricular educational activities to provide intercultural cultivation.

In China, many scholars have examined the connotation of IaH from different perspectives. Zhang Wei and Liu Baocun (2017), from the perspective of university internationalization governance, defined IaH as "institutions utilizing existing high-quality international educational resources to build an international campus with distinctive local characteristics"<sup>[9]</sup>. Lan Siliang and Ma Jiani (2021), focusing on the development of students' intercultural knowledge and abilities, viewed IaH as "the integration of various world-class high-quality higher education resources into the entire process of curriculum, teaching, management, and assessment within higher education institutions"<sup>[10]</sup>. Regarding IaH in vocational education, Li Yifan and Ma Jun (2022) considered its goal to be enhancing the international competence of technical and skilled talents, along with their survival and career development abilities in a diverse society<sup>[11]</sup>. Luo Hongfang and Bao Bingbing (2023) argued that high-quality IaH in vocational institutions, compared to traditional universities, differs most significantly in its distinctive vocational characteristics. It cultivates applied artisan talents with a pronounced vocational nature, capable of serving international industrial development with proficient technical skills and efficient professional abilities<sup>[12]</sup>.

Thus, the goal of IaH in HVE is to cultivate high-quality technical and skilled talents with an international perspective for regional industries and global enterprises, facilitating experience and technology exchange. Its main characteristics include vocational nature, which dictates that the selected international high-quality resources should be those vocational education resources and enterprise technical standards that can promote students' technical and skill development. Its main content, besides the internationalization of institutional management, formal, and informal curricula, should also include the internationalization of academy-industry cooperation. Examples include collaborating with global enterprises on customized training classes, co-building internship and training bases with multinational corporations, and exchanging or hiring part-time teachers between institutions and enterprises. Through deep cooperation and exchange, these efforts aim to cultivate students' international perspectives and enhance their professional competence, providing human resource

support for regional economic industries to achieve high-level opening up, thereby supporting the building of a leading country in education.

Therefore, this paper posits that the connotation of IaH in HVE within the context of building a leading country in education is: *an internationalization model wherein, within the local campus, selected foreign high-quality vocational education resources and enterprise technical standards are referenced and integrated into various dimensions of institutional operation, including management, formal curriculum, informal curriculum, and academy-industry cooperation. This aims to comprehensively enhance the capacity to serve the high-quality development of regional economic industries by strengthening all students' intercultural understanding and technical skill levels.* IaH possesses an inclusive character, embodying educational equity. Its objective is to serve the high-quality development of regional economic industries, which highly aligns with the requirements of building a leading country in education. It is destined to become an effective measure for HVE to contribute to this endeavor.

### **3. Internationalization at Home in Higher Vocational Education within the Context of Building China into a Leading Country in Education: Promotion Strategies**

#### **3.1. Strengthen Policy Support and Guidance, Shaping Recognition for IaH Concepts**

The European Association for International Education's *Position Paper on Internationalization at Home* and the European Commission's *European Higher Education in the World* communication formally included IaH. Countries like the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK, Australia, and India have incorporated relevant strategies into their national agendas or education policies<sup>[2]</sup>, providing guidance and dissemination from a top-level design perspective. China should also formulate specific policies to support the implementation and promotion of IaH. Simultaneously, it should appropriately adjust evaluation metrics overly focused on cross-border mobility, increasing attention to indicators related to IaH. These could include the number of internationally oriented courses offered, the proportion of students enrolled in such courses, experience in localizing introduced technologies or standards, awards won in WorldSkills competitions, and hosting distinctive international events. This would guide HVE institutions to provide intercultural cultivation for all students, shifting away from the previous pattern where internationalization development overly emphasized numerical growth and scale expansion without seriously reflecting on the actual effectiveness of international activities<sup>[13]</sup>.

#### **3.2. Construct Institutional Safeguarding Mechanisms, Smoothing Channels for IaH Practice**

As the primary drivers of IaH, HVE institutions should, based on their specific circumstances, determine their internationalization positioning and goals. For instance, high-level vocational institutions with accumulated experience in internationalization should strengthen connotative development and strive to export models and standards. Regional higher vocational institutions should prioritize their institutional development, enhance their educational quality, and strengthen their capacity to serve the socioeconomic development of their respective regions. Industry-specific institutions should focus on developing professional characteristics and actively partner with relevant industries and enterprises. For higher vocational institutions with relatively limited capacity, the development of internationalization initiatives should be grounded in practical realities and pursued through a methodical, incremental approach. The primary objective should be to serve the core mission of the institution, prioritizing the provision of high-quality cross-cultural educational experiences for both staff and students. By introducing international resources, these efforts should ultimately feed back into enhancing teaching quality and strengthening the institution's core competitiveness. Based on different positioning and goals, appropriate development plans for IaH should be formulated. Through lectures, seminars, and other forms, the importance of IaH for the development of both staff and students should be popularized to build consensus throughout the institution. More importantly, incentive mechanisms should be established to mobilize faculty to actively explore how to utilize international quality resources to improve classroom teaching quality; encourage foreign teachers to leverage their intercultural background advantages to conduct distinctive intercultural educational activities; and adopt an outcome-

oriented approach to encourage students to actively improve foreign language proficiency. Participate in intercultural activities, and enhance intercultural understanding. Furthermore, an international campus atmosphere should be fostered by building an internationalized campus environment—for example, using bilingual signage on cultural walls and bulletin boards, encouraging international students to participate in campus student activities, and utilizing platforms like the second classroom and student clubs to organize distinctive international activities. This allows students to deepen their recognition of local culture through comparison with foreign cultures.

### **3.3. Advance Cross-Border Exchange and Cooperation, Supporting the Effective Implementation of IaH**

IaH and cross-border internationalization are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. IaH cannot succeed without the support of quality resources obtained through cross-border internationalization, while cross-border activities often require a baseline level of institutional internationalization to be feasible. The two supplement and develop each other. Therefore, HVE institutions must not neglect cross-border internationalization. They should persistently engage in cross-border exchanges and cooperation through various forms such as co-construction, introduction, or participation. Meanwhile, when introducing resources or engaging in external exchanges, institutions should avoid blindly worshipping Western university rankings or simply imitating undergraduate universities. They should adopt a stance centered on their own needs, grounded in reality, highlighting the characteristics of vocational education, featuring international academy-industry integration and university-enterprise cooperation, and selectively carrying out international activities. Secondly, introduced international resources must be utilized efficiently, transforming these valuable experiences into teaching practices and forming tangible teaching outcomes that benefit all students. Simultaneously, HVE institutions should actively explore international academy-industry cooperation, inviting high-quality local enterprises with international operations to provide guidance for their internationalization efforts. These enterprises possess informational advantages regarding overseas social development, foreign education policies, vocational education abroad, and international talent demands<sup>[14]</sup>. They can provide HVE institutions with international standards and practical experience, making internationalization efforts more targeted and effective.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study, grounded in the era of building China into a leading country in education, delves into the connotations, value implications, and practical pathways of Internationalization at Home (IaH) in Higher Vocational Education (HVE). The research indicates that IaH is by no means a simple alternative or supplement to traditional internationalization but represents a paradigm restructuring. Its core lies in deeply integrating international and vocational dimensions into the entire process of local talent cultivation, enabling all students, not just a select elite, to benefit from international educational resources. This aligns precisely with the dual pursuit of equity and quality inherent in building a leading country in education. Specifically, the value of IaH in HVE is manifested in three aspects: firstly, it transcends the limitations of traditional cross-border mobility, exemplifying the concept of inclusive development and educational equity; secondly, by introducing and localizing internationally advanced vocational education resources, curriculum systems, and enterprise technical standards, it directly empowers the dual enhancement of students' technical skill levels and intercultural professional competence, providing talent support for industrial transformation and upgrading; thirdly, through internationalized academy-industry cooperation combining China's "introducing from outside" and "going global" strategy, it effectively serves the integration of regional economies into global industrial chains, offering grassroots innovative practices for national strategy.

However, unleashing the vast potential of IaH requires systematic efforts. In the future, it is imperative to strengthen top-level design at the national level, introducing specific policies and evaluation guidelines; stimulate institutional agency at the university level, constructing internationalization development plans and incentive mechanisms tailored

to their unique characteristics; and deepen academy-industry integration at the practical level, promoting the efficient transformation of cross-border quality resources into local teaching outcomes. Only in this way can China's Higher Vocational Education, with its irreplaceable typological features, contribute its due strength to building China into a leading country in education. Future research could further focus on differentiated models of IaH across various professional fields, effectiveness evaluations of international curriculum localization, and case studies of collaborative university-enterprise “going global” initiatives, thereby continuously enriching and refining the theoretical system of internationalization for vocational education with Chinese characteristics.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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