

Regionalization of Asian Dental Universities as an Excellence Framework: A Promising Hope Toward Decolonization?

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

This study examines the motivations of leading dental universities in Asia for regional collaboration and partnership by establishing an 'Asian model' of dental education and how this reflects a decolonial perspective on internationalization of higher education. This study adopts a decolonial lens to examine the design and implementation of the *Campus Asia Plus* project, a regional collaboration among leading dental universities in Asia. Using a case study approach, this qualitative study employs written questionnaires to gather insights from administrators on project design and collaborative frameworks. The study finds that the design of an Asian model of dental education reflects a decolonial approach, emphasizing context-specific and demographically relevant perspectives on dental education and research. Rather than adhering to so-called global standards, this model prioritizes regional needs and knowledge systems. This research provides empirical insights into how regional collaboration in internationalization can contribute to an excellence framework for higher education development.

Full paper

Introduction

Higher education has become increasingly globalized, but Anglo-American models still dominate definitions of academic excellence (Marginson, 2022; Hazelkorn, 2015). This dominance extends to medical and dental education, where curricula, accreditation systems, and pedagogical approaches often reflect Western priorities. While internationalization has brought valuable collaboration and quality improvements, it has also raised concerns about the marginalization of local knowledge systems, especially in the Global South (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). In response, some Asian universities are seeking

alternative, regionally grounded frameworks that align with local healthcare needs and cultural contexts.

This study examines the *Campus Asia Plus* initiative, a regional collaboration among leading dental universities in Asia, to explore how such partnerships can develop an "Asian model" of dental education that both meets international standards and reflects a decolonial approach.

Literature Review

Scholars have critiqued the global dominance of Western higher education models, which reinforce neoliberal market logic, cultural homogenization, and knowledge hierarchies (Marginson, 2022; Stein & Silva, 2020). In medical and dental education, the adoption of Western standards often overlooks regional disease patterns, cultural attitudes toward healthcare, and diverse clinical practices (Nguyen et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2022). Research from Japan, South Korea, and China highlights efforts to internationalize dental education while integrating local priorities (Ge et al., 2022; Goto, 2014; Lee & Lim, 2014). However, challenges such as unequal access to global opportunities, the dominance of Western accreditation bodies, and resource disparities persist (Bourke, 1997; Zheng et al., 2021). Scholars argue that regional collaboration could offer a pathway to educational sovereignty and epistemic diversity (Zhang, 2024; Dei, 2019).

Theory and Method

This study is grounded in decolonial theory, which challenges Western-centric knowledge production and promotes plural epistemologies rooted in local and regional contexts (Mignolo, 2011; Stein & De Andreotti, 2016). Decolonization in higher education involves not only rejecting imposed models but also creating alternative frameworks that reflect cultural, demographic, and technological realities.

A qualitative case study approach was used, focusing on the *Campus Asia Plus* project. Data were collected via written questionnaires from administrators and program leaders at participating dental universities in Japan, South Korea, China, and other ASEAN countries. Responses to seven open-ended questions were analyzed thematically using Quirkos software, focusing on motivations for collaboration, educational distinctiveness, challenges, and decolonial aspirations.

Findings

Four key themes emerged:

Motivations for Regional Collaboration

Participants cited the need to expose students and faculty to diverse healthcare systems, clinical practices, and patient demographics across Asia. Regional collaboration was also seen as a way to reduce dependence on Western accreditation and develop shared standards reflecting regional needs.

Distinctiveness of Asian Dental Education

Respondents emphasized the importance of developing curricula that address the oral morphology, disease patterns, and cultural attitudes unique to Asian populations. Technological leadership in digital dentistry and AI was also highlighted as a regional strength.

Progress and Challenges

The project successfully facilitated student exchanges, joint research, and academic networking. However, challenges included standardizing curricula and qualifications, ensuring equitable access to training resources, and balancing regional specificity with global recognition.

Decolonial Aspirations

The initiative reflects a broader effort to develop educational frameworks that resist Western epistemological dominance. Participants highlighted the importance of creating context-specific models that maintain international competitiveness while promoting regional knowledge systems and healthcare priorities.

Conclusion

The *Campus Asia Plus* project demonstrates how regional collaboration can foster academic excellence without relying solely on Western models. While significant challenges remain—particularly in standardization, resource equity, and global recognition—the project represents a promising step toward decolonizing dental education in Asia. It also offers a replicable framework for other disciplines seeking to balance internationalization with cultural relevance and epistemic diversity.

Limitations and Implications

This study has several limitations. The small sample size, focusing primarily on administrators and program leaders, limits the breadth of perspectives; including faculty, students, and alumni would provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the use of English for data collection may have constrained participants' ability to express complex ideas fully. Despite these limitations, the findings offer important implications. They highlight the potential of regional

collaboration to foster decolonial educational models that reflect local needs while maintaining international relevance. The Campus Asia Plus initiative provides a valuable example for policymakers, educators, and scholars aiming to promote academic sovereignty, equitable partnerships, and epistemic diversity not only in dental education but also across other professional and academic disciplines in the Global South.