

INTERNATIONALIZATION in Higher Education Institutions: Mobilization in FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are now called to translate global competitiveness and international academic standards into transformative action. However, HEIs have presented a tremendously difficult propensity to internationalize. Using a qualitative approach, specifically a multiple case study design, the researcher gathered and triangulated the responses of directors and coordinators who actively participated in the in-depth interview. The findings on the challenges encountered by HEIs in mobilization efforts revealed the following essential themes: financial constraints, visa and immigration policies, language and cultural barriers, institutional bureaucracy, and limitations in partnerships and support. Best practices in international mobilization generated the following themes: financial sustainability, streamlining visa processes, cultural and language preparedness, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, academic integration, and strengthening institutional partnerships. In addition, the findings revealed regarding facilitation and implementation of mobility extracted the following themes: role of international offices, coordinating with government and embassies, securing administrative approvals, managing risks and emergencies, aligning academic programs with career pathways, and ensuring adequate funding and logistics. In the cross-case analysis in terms of the challenges, the following themes were generated: financial limitations, visa and immigration issues, language and cultural obstacles, institutional bureaucracy, and insufficient partnership structures. Moreover, in terms of best practices, themes include financially sustainable models, efficient visa processing, pre-departure cultural and language training, bureaucratic streamlining, holistic academic integration, and robust international partnerships. Additionally, in terms of implementation and facilitation, the following themes emerged: empowered internationalization offices, collaboration with government and embassies, structured administrative systems, comprehensive risk management, curricular and career alignment, and integrated logistical and funding mechanisms.

KEYWORDS: *Education, higher education institution, internationalization, mobilization, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions are now called to translate global competitiveness and international academic standards into transformative action. The internationalization of higher education has typically been seen and considered a contemporary trend driven by the engagement of international students and academic staff, opening collaboration, and networking overseas (Tight, 2022). Although it opens opportunities and expands global academic networking, higher education institutions currently experience new challenges of internationalization that encompass several key issues. These include the absence of clear policies and guidelines, inefficiencies in the organizational structures supporting internationalization, and persistent financial, infrastructure, and equipment shortcomings (De Wit, 2020).

At the same time, it faces growing challenges, including financial instability, geopolitical tensions, and natural disasters (Tran, 2023). Despite these complexities, there is a pressing need to view international education through a more human-centered lens that prioritizes exchanging academic opportunities through mobility, personal growth, and meaningful learning experiences, ensuring that education remains a humanizing force. A key issue that continues to shape the sector is student well-being. Deuchar and Gorur (2023) highlighted the importance of integrating care as a foundational principle, emphasizing that prioritizing well-being can help redefine the future of international education in higher education.

In Paris, the International Association of Universities (IAU) — a UNESCO-affiliated organization — conducted the 6th Global Survey on higher education internationalization, identifying the most important external obstacles/challenges to advancing internationalization. From the survey, 52 percent experienced limited funding to support their institution's internationalization, 40 percent language barriers, 26 percent difficulties of recognition and equivalences of qualifications, study programs, and course credits at the regional/national level, 20 percent of Visa restrictions imposed by our country on international students, researchers and academics, and another 20 percent about negative perceptions of the situation in hosting country (political, economic, security aspects, etc.) (Marinoni & Cardona, 2024).

Moreover, studies in Portugal also revealed significant issues in implementing internationalization in higher education institutions, which

mentioned risks and challenges due to political reasons, such as the national security of a particular country. Then, the study also revealed economic issues, brain-drain as opposed to brain-gain, micro-type motivations, more directly linked to personal and institutional interests in implementing mobility (Serpa, 2025).

While these new developments are intended to increase access to higher education and meet the appetite for foreign credentials and employment, an international study from the University of Toronto, Canada, Knight (2024) also discovered the need for more nuanced understanding of internationalization, weak institutional capacity, lack of adequate marketing strategies, immigration and legal barriers, and brain drain and talent retention.

Research Questions:

1. What challenges and best practices emerge in the mobilization efforts of higher education institutions within the internationalization framework?
2. How do higher education institutions facilitate and implement international mobility programs for students, faculty, and researchers?
3. What explains the similarities and differences of each case?

Theoretical Lens

This study was seen through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977), which explains that an interconnected environmental system shapes the development of an individual. This includes the immediate surroundings, like family, and broader societal structures, like culture, norms, and traditions, on a wider level. Incorporating human development is anchored and shaped by interactions within multiple layers of the environment, and those five systems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—each play a unique role in shaping behavior and growth over time. It now reveals how individuals are influenced by their environment, particularly in local and international settings, by understanding the layered structures of the theory. In higher education, this theory reflects a meaningful lens to explore how students, faculty, and higher education institutions interact with each other on a global scale. Ultimately, the interconnection of individuals, groups, companies, and norms plays a vital role in internationalization, especially in mobility, as to how it also understands Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) and how it plays in the global academic experience.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study utilized a qualitative methodology, specifically a multiple-case study approach. Qualitative research, according to Creswell (2016), is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem.

Specifically, multiple case studies also helped the researcher select multiple cases to illustrate an issue, draw comparisons, and show different perspectives on the same problem. Moreover, this approach involves examining multiple cases to identify patterns or make comparisons.

Research Participants. The study selected participants from private higher education institutions in Davao City exposed to mobility, either inbound or outbound internationalization programs. There were two to three participants for each selected institution that created and mobilized internationalization programs. Directors and coordinators who actively manage and carry out the institution's internationalization initiatives and exhibit academic literacy, cultural sensitivity, and proficiency in public relations, leadership, and communication were chosen for the study.

Case Units. The case units for this study consisted of selected private higher education institutions in Davao City that are exposed to mobilizing inbound and outbound internationalization programs. Each case unit includes an International Relations Officer (IRO)—a director, coordinator, or staff member—who provides unique insights into managing the internationalization mobility of their respective institutions.

This case unit represents a private Catholic institution in Davao City, Philippines, known for being the first Catholic school in the city. The institution offers both basic and higher education programs. The Director of the Internationalization Office participated in this case. The assigned code for the participant to facilitate identification during the audit trail is Cassiopea.

This case unit is a private, non-sectarian university located on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, Philippines. The Director of the Internationalization Office participated in this case. Danaya is the assigned code for the participant to streamline identification during the audit trail.

This case unit is a private, Catholic, research-oriented, coeducational institution managed by the Dominican Sisters of the Trinity in Davao City, Philippines. It offers programs in both basic and higher education. The Director of the Internationalization Office participated in this case. The assigned code for the participant, for ease of tracking during the audit trail, was Amihan.

Date Resources. Data recording protocol is highlighted to document information accurately during observations and interviews (Creswell, 2019). In alignment with this, the researcher used an audio recorder and a smartphone application to record participants' conversations and insights. These recordings are subsequently transcribed for analysis. This multiple-case study utilizes various data sources, including in-depth interviews and observations. Transcripts were generated based on interviews guided by a validated questionnaire, which was reviewed and approved by content, methodology, and field experts. The researcher gathered relevant information on each participant's school website to get supporting details besides the interviews and transcripts.

Data Collection. The data collection commenced after asking permission from the Office of the Graduate School Dean of the University of the Immaculate Conception (UIC) to conduct the interview. The researcher also submitted the manuscript to the UIC Research Ethics Committee (REC) for further review and approval, along with other necessary documents. This collection approach guarantees that the researcher and the study carefully adhere to the protocols of the research committee. Through interpreted analysis, the interview (semi-structured) lasted around 45 to 60 minutes, based on the participants' responses. The researcher then transcribed the data from the interview using an AI-assisting tool. However, the researcher ensured that the excerpts were correct by checking each utterance. The analyst then endorsed the transcription to analyze the data and identify themes, case units, and remarks. Thus, after the researcher receives the analyzed data, the researcher interprets carefully to build knowledge.

Data Analysis. In the forthcoming study, the researcher adopted Creswell's (2019) six-step process for qualitative data analysis. The first step involved preparing the data for analysis, such as transcribing participant interviews. The data were then coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. These themes were labeled and categorized for further exploration and analysis. A thematic approach was employed to represent the findings in the study's narrative. Each identified theme was discussed and substantiated by data

evidence to ensure credibility and depth. The researcher interpreted the findings, highlighting the mobilization journey in the internationalization of higher education institutions. The study also applied both within-case and cross-case analyses for the case analysis. Each case was subjected to an in-depth within-case analysis, yielding rich and detailed descriptions unique to that case. The cross-case analysis integrates the data gathered from all case units to address the research questions. This process identified significant themes or core ideas across the cases.

Trustworthiness of the Study. To establish trustworthiness, the researcher is guided by the principle of Lincoln and Guba (1985), which states that the trustworthiness of a study is critical in determining its value and follows the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher ensured that the intensity of the study correctly corresponded throughout the data collection, especially during the participants' interviews. Triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement are key strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Triangulation strengthens credibility by using multiple data sources or methods to cross-verify findings. To enhance transferability in qualitative research, the researcher offers thick and rich descriptions of the study's context, participants, and findings. The researcher asked for approval from an expert to justify the accuracy of the necessary data, ideas, and essential themes. A triangulation method of data was also employed, and relevant information from different participants is combined to test the validity of the data. The researcher should set aside related personal accusations, views, perspectives, and biases to avoid data distortion while addressing the study's confirmability.

Ethical Considerations. To carefully understand ethical values and responsibilities, the University of the Immaculate Conception guides this study through the Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC), which grants, reviews, and ensures that the study is ethically ready. Thus, before the study, participants' consent and privacy were obtained, and the confidentiality of the answers was protected.

RESULTS

Using thematic analysis and the generation of core ideas, the comparison is accomplished with the three research questions as subheadings: challenges emerge in the mobilization efforts of higher education institutions, best practices emerge in the mobilization efforts of higher education institutions, ways on how higher education institutions facilitate and implement international mobility programs for students, faculty, and researchers.

The data on the lived experiences that contributed to how higher education institutions navigated the internationalization challenges focuses on mobilization, their best practices, facilitation, and implementation, and what explains the similarities, differences, and uniqueness of each case are summarized into major themes, core ideas in a tabulated format.

On the Challenges in the Mobilization Efforts of Higher Education Institutions

The data on the description of higher education institutions' experiences in mobilization in terms of the emerging challenges are summarized into major themes and core ideas in Table 1.

Both cases, Danaya and Amihan, place a heavy financial burden on participants, potentially limiting mobility opportunities to only those who can afford it. Their approaches lack systematic, institutionalized funding mechanisms. This scenario differs from Cassiopea's case because they employ a diversified funding approach combining institutional budgets, external grants, international partnerships, and partial student subsidies to ensure sustainable and equitable mobility programs.

Regarding visa immigration policies, the three cases have different challenges in mobilization efforts. Danaya focuses on mobility programs within ASEAN nations to minimize visa complications, benefiting from the regional agreements that simplify student travel. In contrast, Cassiopea has developed institutionalized processes for visa facilitation, including dedicated staff for embassy coordination and standardized documentation for EU partnerships.

Language and Cultural Barriers. The presentation focused on language and cultural barriers, especially in international mobilization. Both Cases, Cassiopea and Amihan, both implement structured programs—language courses, artistic workshops, and pre-departure orientations—to prepare participants for

intercultural challenges. In contrast, Danaya's philosophy reframes cultural and language hurdles as experiential learning moments rather than problems to solve.

Institutional Bureaucracy. The three cases have different experiences and challenges in terms of institutional bureaucracy. Cassiopea experiences bureaucratic slowdowns in mobility approvals, reflecting common challenges in cross-departmental coordination and compliance processes. Meanwhile, Danaya streamlines operations through liberal management policies that delegate authority to program levels, minimizing redundant approvals. On the other hand, Amihan enforces meticulous 2-month approval timelines and multi-layered authorization chains, ensuring thorough vetting but often missing mobility opportunities due to inflexible timelines.

Partnership and Support. Similarly, the three cases also have different perspectives on the challenges of collaboration and support. Cassiopea strategically aligns all mobility programs with academic objectives, ensuring that exchanges directly enhance degree competencies through credit-bearing recognition. Differently, Amihan maintains strict curricular exclusivity, approving only mobility tied to coursework outcomes and rejecting extracurricular exchanges. Interestingly, Danaya adopts an adaptive partnership model that accommodates academic and non-academic mobility (e.g., volunteer programs, internships).

Best practices in the mobilization efforts of higher education institutions

The data on the description of higher education institutions' experiences in terms of best practices that emerge in the mobilization efforts are summarized into major themes and core ideas in Table 2.

Financial Sustainability. Cassiopea employs a multi-source financing model combining institutional budgets, government grants, funding, and partial student contributions. On the other hand, Danaya places primary financial responsibility on participating students through out-of-pocket payments for mobility costs. Thus, Amihan actively engages alumni networks to sponsor mobility through donations and targeted scholarships.

Streamlining Visa Processes. Danaya strategically focuses mobility programs within ASEAN nations to capitalize on simplified regional visa policies and mutual recognition agreements. Cassiopea has institutionalized visa processing through dedicated staff, standardized documentation systems, and pre-negotiated agreements with priority destinations. Amihan handles visa requirements reactively through case-by-case solutions, providing flexibility for last-minute opportunities but resulting in inconsistent experiences.

Cultural and Language Preparedness. Both cases, Cassiopea and Amihan, have similar cases in implementing structured preparatory programs, including mandatory language courses, cultural sensitivity workshops, and pre-departure orientation sessions. In contrast, Danaya adopts a progressive philosophy that intentionally frames cultural and linguistic challenges as valuable learning experiences rather than obstacles to overcome.

Reducing Bureaucracy. The three cases have different best practices for reducing bureaucracy. Cassiopea has moderate bureaucratic slowdowns due to its structured approval processes involving multiple departments (academic units, and senior leadership). Meanwhile, Danaya streamlined the model, delegating significant authority to program coordinators, enabling faster decision-making. Meanwhile, Amihan maintains rigorous, multi-layered approval chains with fixed timelines (e.g., 2-month minimum processing).

Academic Integration. Cassiopea systematically aligns all mobility programs with defined learning outcomes, ensuring academic relevance through credit-bearing exchanges and pre-approved course equivalencies, especially aligning academic integration to the AUN-QA framework and Outcomes-Based Education. Amihan, on the other hand, maintains strict curricular purity by approving only mobility activities directly tied to degree requirements. Danaya accommodates both credit-bearing and non-credit mobility (e.g., volunteer programs, short courses, Erasmus+), recognizing diverse learning pathways in accepting and selecting topics and programs.

Strengthening Partnerships. Both cases, Cassiopea and Danaya, formalize partnerships through detailed MOUs that clearly define responsibilities, academic standards, and risk management protocols. Consequently, Amihan manages differently because it prioritizes flexible partnership frameworks that allow rapid adjustments to changing conditions (e.g., geopolitical shifts, health crises).

Ways on How Higher Education Institutions Facilitate and Implement International Mobility Programs for students, faculty, and researchers

The data on the description of higher education institutions' experiences regarding how they facilitate and implement the mobilization efforts are summarized into major themes and core ideas in Table 3.

Intensify the role of International Offices. All cases empower their international offices (IZN Centers) as central hubs for mobility management, demonstrating institutional commitment to professionalized global engagement.

Government/Embassy Coordination. Locally, these cases have been visible and practiced throughout every mobility. Seeing that case, Cassiopea and Danaya primarily engage government and embassy relationships through formal funding channels such as embassies and consular offices, Erasmus+, CHED, and Fulbright. On the other hand, Amihan complements traditional government channels by leveraging alumni diplomats for consular support and engaging in grassroots embassy outreach through local chapters.

Administrative Approvals. Danaya and Amihan adopt ASEAN-centric strategies that streamline administrative approvals, align mobility programs with regional frameworks, and prioritize visa-friendly destinations. Meanwhile, Cassiopea demonstrates systemic reliance on embassy liaisons, often leading to bureaucratic delays and inconsistent communication.

Risk and Emergency Management. Cassiopea and Danaya emphasize structured approaches through formal contracts and comprehensive insurance coverage to manage protocols, risks, and emergencies during international mobility. In contrast, Amihan demonstrates a more dynamic approach to crisis response, leveraging real-time monitoring and flexible decision-making.

Academic and Career Alignment. The two cases, Cassiopea and Danaya, emphasize curriculum alignment by integrating mobility programs into academic structures, ensuring that international experiences contribute directly to course outcomes. Meanwhile, Amihan enforces stricter academic priorities by limiting mobility to programs that clearly align with institutional learning outcomes.

Funding and Logistics. Cassiopea and Danaya primarily engage alumni and internal funding as promoters or advocates of international mobility programs, helping raise awareness and institutional visibility. On the other hand, Amihan actively mobilizes alumni not only for advocacy but also for direct involvement in funding and logistical arrangements.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study illustrate the complex nature of internationalization in higher education organizations (HEIs), especially when examining mobilization. The analyses of the three institutional cases, namely UIC as Cassiopea, HCDC as Danaya, and SPC as Amihan, show that international mobility is not a one-activity, isolated event, but is part of a system that incorporates strategic alignment, coherent administration, financial sustainability, academic integration, and external partnerships. The following discussion outlines each of these dimensions.

Intensify the role of International Offices. Primarily, the three cases showed unequivocally the amplified role of international offices as critical units to manage and facilitate mobility programs. These offices serve as centralized coordinating units, and thus everything (inbound and outbound mobility) is usually operationalized through the office, which involves planning, engaging and monitoring partners, and completing post-mobility documentation. This institutional position framework emphasizes the embedding of internationalization into the three core functions of HEIs. The professionalization of these units shows a broader institutional commitment to embedding global engagement into the university's operations and governance.

Institutional Bureaucracy. Moving forward, the theme of national administrative bureaucracy also created a hindrance and an opportunity to reflect. Both cases of Cassiopea and AmiHan displayed complex, hierarchical decision-making procedures that caused delays and, in some cases, missed opportunities. The case of Danaya provided a contrasting model with its decentralized and simplified approach. By effectively delegating authority to program coordinators and academic units, Danaya experienced shorter processing times with fewer stages of bureaucratic hindrances. This aligns with the assertion that program flexibility and institutional autonomy simplify processes related explicitly to global programming, enabling universities to better respond to autonomy programs. Therefore, a reasonable balance of compliance and flexibility is necessary to balance quality assurance with the timing of internationalization mobility activities.

Government/Embassy Coordination. In addition, governmental agencies and foreign embassies played a significant role in aid for international mobility. Cases A and B established intentional linkages with national entities such as the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), and embassies to access funding and streamline visa documentation and process. Case C took more of an informal and grassroots approach by mobilizing alumni who held diplomatic positions, and by also mobilizing local consular networks. The two types of approaches also correspond with the notion of a multi-scalar governance approach, whereby top-down and bottom-up mechanisms expanded the institutional internationalization of the university. Hence, HEIs are positioned to pursue various forms of participation with governmental and diplomatic agencies that might increase agility and effectiveness in managing cross-border mobilization.

Funding and Logistics. Both cases of AmiHan and Danaya relied entirely on student funding, which may limit mobility options for students with the capacity to pay. In comparison, Cassiopea's case provided a model of mobility/inclusion through its multi-sourced funding, using internal budgetary planning, external grants, and contributions from alumni as funding sources. This multi-source approach references "comprehensive internationalization," which encompasses financial planning as a key strategy. In relation, AmiHan desired alumni involvement as active stakeholders; however, Cassiopea alumni merely participated in fundraising and logistical roles, suggesting the power of donor engagement in realizing institutional or systemic internationalization agendas.

This consideration suggests that HEI needs to develop long-term financial planning that balances external support systems with student and stakeholder accessibility for mobility.

Academic and Career Alignment. Hence, a more academic aspect of international mobility is the match of mobility to a curricular element and career development. Cases of Cassiopea and Amihan ingrained mobility opportunities in the formal curriculum, allowing students to apply for academic credit and learning outcomes from an international experience.

Danaya's case used a strict interpretation of the curriculum and only allowed mobility activities pre-approved by the formal educational requirements. Beyond the distinction of cases, the cases demonstrated the continued debate, tensions, and struggles within international education in finding a balance between the academic rigor of structured curriculum and experiential learning. Cases of Cassiopea and Amihan also used frameworks like Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and the ASEAN University Network–Quality Assurance (AUN-QA), conceptualized mobility principles within a systematized context, so student learning could be reinforced and maintain academic integrity.

Risk and Emergency Management. The areas of risk and emergency management are equally important. Danaya and Cassiopea's case established many risk protocols for geopolitical and environmental risks, including site assessments, learning contracts, and insurance. For Amihan, with inevitably weaker and less developed risk protocols, they instead established a more adaptive and real-time monitoring system that allowed for greater flexibility and responsive interventions in emergencies. This speaks to the expectation of HEIs that they must ensure participants are safe and develop resilience at the institutional level, which may depend on risk management structures. Good examples of shared practices include resourcing and incentivizing linkages between students, faculty, or administrators from different countries and shared accountabilities for supporting stronger links and collaborations to community engagement pre-settlement.

Cultural and Language Preparedness. In fact, language and cultural preparedness also emerged as features of a positive mobility experience. Cassiopea and Amihan worked to build structured interventions that involved language courses, cultural sensitivity workshops, and pre-departure and

upon-arrival orientations to prepare participants with the soft skills that might be needed to work in intercultural environments. Danaya, on the other hand, saw these barriers as part of the learning experience, noting their position in educational institutions and embracing them as a means to experiential learning and not as an impediment to be solved before leaving, as in other cases. Academic mobility is a complex area with an aspirational concept, a growing reality, and a complex policy area.

Strengthening Partnerships. International partnerships are essential for mobility. Cassiopea and Danaya have created formalized agreements with their global partners, including a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), to make clear mutual expectations, ensure mutual accountability, align their academic objectives, and mitigate risk. Amihan adopted a less formal counterpart in their agreement with international partners, establishing a basis for continuous adaptation and change related to global positioning due to contrasting global experiences and other political unrest. This conjunction of formal and informal partnerships resonates with Altbach and Knight's (2007) position that an effective collaboration involves structure and relative informality. A structure provides certainty, while informality allows flexibility for innovation and resilience, a necessary skill in an accelerated and volatile global environment.

In summary, the discussion indicates that effective international mobility in higher education (HE) institutions cannot be understood solely through the lens of opportunity, which could mean many things, but rather the implications of institutional framework aligning with university specificity, inclusive policy, and proactive management. Although HE institutions practice international mobility differently, their collective experiences reinforce the importance of absorptive capacity, integrative effort, and contextually relevant ideas to enable sustainable and scaled internationalization efforts in higher education in the Philippines. While this provides significant groundwork for policy recommendations and practical actions made in the next chapter, there is still considerable work to better understand the role of international mobility in higher education.

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