Inclusive Education: The Strategic Catalyst of Internationalization at a Philippine State University

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the practices of inclusive higher education toward achieving internationalization at a state university in Romblon, Philippines. The study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically a case study, to delve deep into the subjective experiences of academic managers involved in the internationalization process. The study was conducted at a state university in the MIMAROPA Region, Philippines during AY 2022-2023, focusing on inclusiveness, interconnectedness, and internationalization within education. The key stakeholders in this research were the academic managers and the dean of instruction, who provided a multifaceted perspective on the university's practices. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants. Data collection included the use of in-depth interviews. Following data collection, the data was organized before implementing a rigorous thematic analysis process consisting of steps like familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining, mapping, and finalizing themes. The study emphasized the importance of inclusive higher education practices across multiple components within the university system. It aimed to offer valuable insights into the experiences of academic managers and faculty. The study hopes to contribute to the understanding and development of more effective policies and practices for inclusiveness, interconnectedness, and internationalization in higher education.

Keywords: *case study, inclusive education, internationalization*

INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ratified by the Philippines in 2008, marks a crucial shift towards recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities as equal members of society. This Convention emphasizes inclusive education as a fundamental right, necessitating accommodations and support within higher education institutions to ensure equal access. Complementing this rights-based approach, UNESCO's Inclusive Higher Education Project aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, aiming to dismantle barriers through policy reforms, inclusive curriculum development, staff training, and the promotion of accessible digital learning solutions. These global and national initiatives collectively establish a robust framework for creating equitable educational environments.

In the Philippines, the push toward inclusive education faces challenges such as limited resources, inadequate facilities, and insufficient teacher training (Calizo & Agudo, 2023). Despite positive attitudes and supportive cultural values (Santos & Bautista, 2020), effective implementation requires collaboration among parents, teachers, and administrators, alongside rigorous policy monitoring (Torres, 2023) and innovative technological practices (Navarro & Tan, 2022).

Internationalizing higher education in the Philippines is critical for preparing students for a globalized world. Policies and institutional efforts have led to increased international student enrollment and collaborations, enhancing the appeal of Philippine education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Deardorff, 2011a). However, challenges such as cultural and linguistic barriers and the need for robust quality assurance mechanisms persist. Ethical considerations and curricula that explore global perspectives and intercultural competence are crucial for fostering an internationalized educational environment. Initiatives like Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

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and faculty/student mobility programs are essential (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Deardorff, 2011a).

Inclusive education and internationalization are intertwined, with inclusivity ensuring equal opportunities for all students and reducing segregation (UNESCO, 1994; Ainscow & Miles, 2008). While the challenges of internationalization are complex, aligning education with global standards will significantly enhance the educational landscape in the Philippines and beyond, contributing to a more equitable and modern society.

Educational globalization in the 21st century has significantly impacted practices and philosophies within higher education, enriching classrooms through the increased mobility of international students. In the Philippines, the Universal Access to Quality Education Act demonstrates a commitment to inclusive education, aligning with the internationalization efforts emphasized by the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

This study investigated the alignment of inclusive education with internationalization at Romblon State University, focusing on administrators' perspectives. The relationship between inclusivity and internationalization was also explored. Furthermore, inclusivity, interconnectedness, and internationalization function were examined from a non-Western perspective employing the Congruence Model of the Nadler-Tushman Framework, which highlighted the importance of aligning organizational components—environment, people, tasks, and culture—to enhance effectiveness in inclusive education and internationalization. The study also underscored the need for cultural competency among faculty and staff and the alignment of internal strategies with external factors like government policies and market demands. Through this comprehensive approach, the research provides actionable recommendations for internationalizing higher education in non-Western settings, contributing fresh perspectives to the global educational discussion and informing better internationalization strategies.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study approach was used to examine inclusive education practices within an internationalization framework to understand how inclusivity and connectedness are integrated into the internationalization strategies of a state university in the MIMAROPA Region, Philippines. In-depth interviews with academic managers were conducted to gather rich insights into their experiences and perspectives. Data were collected during the second semester of the AY 2022-2023. Key stakeholders, specifically academic managers and the dean of instruction, were purposefully sampled for their relevant roles. Carefully designed and expert-validated email interview guides were used to collect comprehensive data. Thematic analysis (following Braun and Clarke's framework) was applied to interview transcripts to extract insights into the experiences of academic managers and reveal inclusivity and internationalization practices within the university.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive higher education practices across multiple dimensions such as strategy, environment, task, people, and culture in the goal of internationalization at RSU generated five themes.

Strategy: Inclusive Education as a Strategic Catalyst for Internationalization

The themes extracted from this qualitative research encapsulate the profound impact of inclusive education on internationalization efforts within a state university. Inclusive education is a core principle and a powerful driving force in shaping strategic planning and decision-making (P1, P2, P3). Participants recognized that a commitment to inclusivity nurtures an environment welcoming an international perspective (P1). Universities are urged to integrate inclusive strategies, such as ongoing training, diversity appreciation, international student support, and diverse perspectives into the curriculum (P2). Inclusive education influences strategic planning by driving the university to expand its global concept (P3). This expansion includes attracting and supporting international students, developing a globalized curriculum, organizing international activities, and facilitating study-abroad partnerships (P3). Inclusive education necessitates comprehensive decision-making (P4), and institutions are advised to measure the impact of these efforts (P5) while ensuring inclusive recruitment and admissions practices (P6). Policy development centering on inclusivity and diversity is vital for embedding these values within the university's long-term goals (P7). Finally, inclusive education influences an organization's strategic direction, prioritizing equity, accessibility, and diversity (P8). These findings support the scholarly emphasis on inclusivity in university strategic plans for effective Internationalization (Hudzik, 2011; Hauschildt et al., 2015; Deardorff et al., 2012). However, the success of these initiatives hinges on linking policy to outcomes; otherwise, the potential of inclusive education to drive internationalization is lost (Arnesen et al., 2017). Strategic planning that prioritizes inclusivity is essential for aligning actions with goals and enhancing global recognition. Translating plans into practice demands a

focus on where policy and implementation meet (Arnesen et al., 2017; Ainscow et al., 2006).

Institutions must continually adapt their strategies to meet global inclusivity standards (Acedo & Hughes, 2014). Collaboration among stakeholders is vital for successfully implementing inclusive strategies (Mitchell, 2005), ensuring effective integration and promotion of inclusivity and internationalization within the university.

Task: Transformative Influence of Inclusive Education on Institutional Effectiveness and Global Competence

The themes extracted from this research highlight the transformative impact of inclusive education on a university's operations, global competence development, and overall institutional culture. Inclusive practices directly shape task execution (P1), strategic planning (P1), and organizational decision-making (P2), promoting student success and driving the university toward effective globalization strategies. Inclusive education is significant for nurturing global competence, ensuring graduates are well-equipped to navigate a complex world (P3, P5). It facilitates the development of intercultural skills, adaptable mindsets, and the critical thinking and innovation required for graduates to excel (P5). Moreover, inclusive education transforms institutions by nurturing inclusive environments (P5), celebrating cross-cultural understanding (P7), and promoting equality and equitable internationalization processes (P8). While challenges exist in measuring the full impact of inclusive education (P8) and a genuine commitment to resources is essential (P8), universities are actively measuring international involvement (P2), aligning with international standards (P3), and using feedback to assess the impact of inclusive education on internationalization efforts (P6).

Inclusive education transforms institutions from teaching to assessment and support services (Booth et al., 2015). It builds global competence by promoting multilingualism, cultural understanding, and critical thinking in a globalized world (Hunter et al., 2016; Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Inclusive education aligns strategic objectives with internationalization, attracting international students and partners (Knight, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2007). However, challenges like limited resources, resistance to change, and staff skill gaps exist (Ainscow et al., 2006). Implementation requires ongoing commitment, evaluation, and adaptation.

People: Empowerment and Enrichment through Inclusive Education in Higher Learning Institutions

Inclusive education empowers various members of the university community. It benefits students by improving access, engagement, and academic performance while also creating a more welcoming campus environment (P1). Faculty and staff experience professional growth opportunities as they develop the skills needed for inclusive teaching and working environments (P7). Moreover, inclusive education provides a platform for individuals to showcase unique talents and skills, leading to personal development and a stronger sense of community (P5).

Beyond individual empowerment, inclusive education enriches the entire university environment. It promotes a more profound understanding and acceptance of diverse perspectives, breaking societal barriers (P2). Exposure to different cultures and viewpoints enhances knowledge, leading to innovation in teaching and learning (P2). A diverse student body is crucial, allowing students to learn from one another and prepare for life in a multicultural world (P3). Inclusive education promotes a collaborative and dynamic environment, leading to better problem-solving and positive institutional growth (P8).

Proper inclusive education is both democratic and experiential. It embodies a collective decision-making process that values all voices, ensuring that initiatives genuinely reflect the community's needs (P8). Additionally, inclusive education emphasizes active participation and learning by doing. This hands-on approach ensures that everyone involved develops a deep understanding of diversity and inclusion (P8).

While inclusive education goes hand-in-hand with internationalization, it is essential to consider how these concepts impact faculty. Inclusive classrooms, led by faculty, prepare students for global realities. A diverse student body enriches this process, facilitating intercultural learning and understanding. Though there might be initial resistance to some inclusive practices, the benefits are clear and lead to positive institutional transformations supporting internationalization (P3).

Inclusive education empowers by building skills and self-confidence, creating a sense of belonging that leads to greater engagement and better outcomes (Ebersold et al., 2011). It encourages mutual respect and cooperation across diverse backgrounds, creating an inclusive learning environment. Promoting equal opportunities and inclusivity democratizes education, making learning more accessible and engaging.

Inclusive education aligns with internationalization goals by integrating global perspectives into the institution's culture (Leask, 2015; Deardorff, 2011b). This boosts global competitiveness and reputation, making inclusive education a key strategy within global education (Slee, 2013).

Table 1. Key Findings

Dimensions	Main Themes
A. Strategy	• Strategic Planning and Decision Making • Quality of Education and Global Reputation • Policy and Practice
B. Task	• Operational Impact of Inclusive Education • Promotion of Global Competence • Transformation through Inclusive Education • Challenges and Commitment to Inclusive Education • Measurement and Alignment Towards Internationalization
C. People	• Inclusive Education and Empowerment • Enrichment through Understanding and Diversity • Democratization and Participatory Experiences • Inclusive Education and Internationalization
D. Culture	• Inclusive Education and Cultural Diversity • Inclusive Education as a Driving Force for Diversity • Perceptive Understanding of Cultural Differences • The synergy between Inclusive Education and Cultural Perspectives in Internationalization
E. Environment	• Transformational Impact of Inclusive Education • Alignment and Adaptation for Inclusivity • Inclusive Education and Global Readiness • Promotion of Safety, Equality, and Access

Culture: Cultural Synergy through Inclusive Education in the Context of Internationalization

As highlighted by this research, inclusive education is key to promoting cultural diversity, understanding, and a sense of shared purpose in an international setting. Inclusive education is a powerful force, fostering a learning environment that celebrates diversity, balances opportunities, and incorporates a wide range of cultural perspectives throughout the curriculum (P1, P3, P4, P7, P8). Participants recognized that this inclusive approach enhances students' awareness of cultural differences, builds intercultural competence, and facilitates effective collaboration with individuals from diverse backgrounds (P5). Tracer studies provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of these efforts (P5). Ultimately, the synergy between inclusive education and diverse cultural perspectives is a key driver of successful internationalization, highlighting how inclusivity creates a more welcoming and enriching learning environment that prepares students for success in a globalized world (P2).

Inclusive education promotes cultural diversity by respecting and celebrating varied backgrounds (Banks, 2015; Gorski, 2009). This enhances social cohesion and understanding. It catalyzes an inclusive cultural shift, valuing differences for multicultural understanding and global cooperation (Deardorff, 2011b).

By integrating culturally diverse perspectives into teaching, inclusive education promotes cultural awareness and intercultural competence (Bennett, 2013). This synergy between culture and internationalization prepares students for a globalized world, making inclusive education key to internationalizing higher education (Knight, 2012; Taylor & Ali, 2017).

Environment: Transformation and Alignment of the University Environment through Inclusive Education for Global Readiness

By embracing inclusive education, universities cultivate a safe, collaborative environment, preparing students for the globalized world. It aligns physical infrastructure and ideologies to embrace diversity, creating welcoming facilities and resources for all (P1, P4, P6, P7). Inclusive education transcends geographical limitations, ensuring its positive impact is felt regardless of the institution's location (P4). Inclusive education is pivotal in preparing a globally competent workforce and promoting transnational education (P2). Ensuring collaboration and inclusivity prepares students to navigate a diverse professional landscape and facilitates cross-border educational opportunities (P8). Importantly, inclusive education champions safety, equality, and access. It works to prevent discrimination, creates safe spaces for socialization, builds trust within the community, and expands access to higher education for individuals from diverse backgrounds (P5). Collectively, these themes underscore the

transformative power of inclusive education in shaping a university environment that supports student success, fosters global readiness, and prioritizes inclusivity for all.

Inclusive education aligns and adapts physical and educational environments for diversity. This includes infrastructural changes and multilingual resources, regardless of location, to create a welcoming space (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). A sense of pride and belonging enhances student experiences.

It prepares students for global workforces by promoting communication and collaboration skills across diverse groups. Inclusive education facilitates transnational education through online learning and international quality assurance, expanding opportunity and collaboration. Additionally, it promotes safety, equality, and access by ensuring discrimination-free environments and policies that respect all (Forlin, 2010). This expanded access supports internationalization goals.

Inclusive education transforms universities into diverse, globally prepared communities, aligning physical space and ideology to meet diverse student needs. This boosts the institution's global competitiveness (Deardorff, 2006).

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrated that inclusive education is pivotal for advancing internationalization in educational institutions, necessitating robust policy frameworks for effective implementation. It revealed that inclusivity enhances operational efficiency, cultivates global competence among students, and drives transformative cultural diversity within the academic environment. The study emphasized the role of inclusive practices in fostering an empowering and collaborative classroom atmosphere, enhancing institutional reputation and global readiness. Additionally, inclusive education has been highlighted as essential for appreciating and integrating diverse cultural perspectives, promoting a vibrant, inclusive academic community. Overall, the research underscored the integration of inclusive education as a strategic approach to achieving comprehensive internationalization in higher education.

The research recommends that institutions must adopt a collaborative and adaptable approach to implement inclusive internationalization successfully. Involving diverse stakeholders in policymaking ensures alignment with the institution's mission and broader inclusion standards. Fostering cross-departmental and international collaborations provides access to best practices and creates a culture of teamwork. Empowerment is crucial, offering stakeholders recognition and supporting professional development in

inclusive teaching, cultural competency, and global collaboration. Focusing on belonging, accessibility, and proactive cultural sensitivity is vital, with workshops and events designed to break down barriers. Leveraging local culture and celebrating diversity enrich internationalization efforts. A collective effort from faculty, staff, students, and external partners ultimately builds the robust network necessary for sustained success in inclusive internationalization.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms sole authorship of this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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