

International Partner Selection among Higher Education Institutions in Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Japan: A Resource-based View

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Abstract

Cross-border partnerships are increasingly important for higher education in the 21st century. By drawing from the business sector's Resource-based Theory (RBT), this paper explores the considerations related to international partner selection among several higher education institutions (HEIs) in Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Japan. According to RBT, HEIs looking to access knowledge and capabilities, develop their own resources and gain a competitive advantage, may turn to partners with specific *technical capabilities*, *managerial capabilities* or other *intangible resources*. Through document analysis and stakeholder interviews, this investigation identified twelve common attributes that influenced international partner selection for HEIs in these three contexts. Eleven of these twelve fit within RBT's criteria areas of *technical capabilities*, *managerial capabilities* and *intangible resources*. These attributes determined the *attractiveness* of potential partners. However, the twelfth attribute of existing relationships was often the deciding factor of whether or not a partnership would move forward.

Keywords

International partnerships, Resource-based theory, East Asia, Educational programmes

Introduction

Cross-border partnerships and collaboration have become increasingly important in and defining features of higher education in the 21st century (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, 2013; de Wit et al, 2015). International agreements can help higher education institutions (HEIs) develop their own capacity while enabling them to contribute to larger global initiatives. These days, most high-impact research is the result of international collaboration (Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi, 2013), and institutions from all regions are showing greater commitment to collaboration. Despite the increasing global competition in higher education, the sector is still less bound by the traditional rules of the market (Bok, 2003), and HEIs are unique in their potential for collaboration on addressing global issues.

In addition to increasing exchange of students and faculty and research collaboration, often institutions partner internationally to develop new educational programmes, models or institutions. Such programmes commonly blend curriculum and content from one institution with approach and pedagogy from another. At times, international partners work together to create entirely new educational models apart from what previously existed in either context.

To date, much of the existing literature on higher education partnerships is conducted within or focuses on western contexts. Somewhat less attention has been paid to the rationales within Asian HEIs for partnering with institutions overseas to develop new educational programmes on their own campus. A common assumption is that Eastern institutions partner with Western ones in order to capitalize on the external expertise, learn from them, and build their own educational brands through association.

This paper seeks to examine this assumption by looking at cross-border educational partnerships within three diverse though developed Asian contexts: Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region), Japan and Singapore. By drawing from the business sector's Resource-based Theory (RBT), we look to illuminate the rationales within Asian institutions for working with international partners to develop educational programmes. By examining the potential impact of these rationales on the development of such programmes in the region, we can better understand how they influence the educational opportunities available to domestic students.

RBT suggests that firms collaborate to a) access knowledge and capabilities, b) develop their own resources and c) gain a competitive advantage in the market. Thus, competition and access to resources drive collaboration. According to the theory, partnerships are pursued when they offer access to strategic resources at lower costs, institutional learning, and resulting gains in competitive advantage. Such rationales are often prominent in overseas institutions looking to partner with local providers to enter new markets. Although RBT's rationales appear to explain many partnerships within higher education, the theory may ignore higher education's service mission, which may compel institutions to pursue aims beyond their own interests.

To investigate the extent to which RBT can be used as a model to explain educational partnerships within higher education, this study draws on an extensive review of the literature on higher education in the three contexts, analysis of primary and secondary documents, interviews from a range of administrators and faculty at several institutions within each context, as well as the authors' own experiences working with higher education in Hong Kong (HK), Japan and Singapore. We first attempt to identify key individual and institutional rationales for partnering with overseas providers to deliver educational programmes, and then map these rationales against those that RBT would predict.

Existing models of international partnerships in higher education

International partnerships between HEIs have increased dramatically in recent decades, especially within Asia (Chapman, Cummings and Postiglione, 2010). Buck Sutton, Egginton and Favela (2012) argue that “partnerships constitute one of the most philosophically defensible and cost-effective modes of internationalization” (p. 157). de Wit et al (2015) call partnerships “a defining feature of higher education and an essential part of internationalisation” (p. 53). At a recent event, Welch (2018) speculated that “increasingly, innovation is going to be a matter of partnerships, across institutions and systems.” Partnerships can be transformative for universities, enhancing research, student experience, professional training, public engagement, and internationalization (Koehn and Obama, 2012).

Partnerships and agreements can exist at the individual faculty member, departmental, school/college, institutional, or state levels. Activities often include student and/or staff exchange agreements and programmes, research cooperation, joint curriculum development, joint or double degrees, benchmarking exercises, joint bids for international projects, and participation in networks and associations. This study focuses primarily on educational partnerships and international degree programmes.

Stafford and Taylor (2016) point out the complexity of transnational partnerships, including governance, structural, cultural, and academic dimensions, which require adequate oversight, management and alignment from both institutions. In line with the principles of RBT, Sakamoto and Chapman (2011) argued that, despite these complexities and the variety of rationales for collaboration, the majority of partnerships, including academic ones, are economically motivated, with each partner believing they gain something from the transaction. They (ibid) cite organisational, financial, individual and contextual factors contributing to an institution's decision to participate in a cross-partner partnership. Such factors included comparative advantage, existing relationships, anticipated prestige, funding, benefits to faculty, and legal and political constraints.

To make an international partnership successful, Heffernan and Poole (2005) argued that, similar to business-to-business agreements, they require communication, trust, commitment, enough similarity between partners, and some consideration of cultural differences. Fong and Postiglione (2011) also note the importance of identifying appropriate partners. They argue that given the differences between societies, local contexts and institutional characteristics and circumstances, a thorough market analysis is an important requisite for successful collaborative instructional programmes. In their study of cross-border partnerships in Hong Kong, they (ibid) found mutual commitment, government support and a conducive policy environment to be key factors. Notably, they also found that successful collaboration benefited both partners and increased the impact of the programmes.

Resource-based Theory

RBT serves as the foundation of the partner selection framework in this study. According to Peteraf and Barney (2003), RBT focuses on how the resources owned by firms enhance their competitive advantage. There are three assumptions behind the theory. First, the quality and quantity of resources owned by firms are heterogeneous. Second, some resources such as knowledge cannot be traded in a factor market. Third, only valuable, rare and imperfectly imitable resources can enhance a firm's competitive advantage.

Tuten and Urban (2001) suggest that the main objective of forming business partnerships is accessing other firms' resources. Firms can choose to buy semi-finished goods or services from markets if they do not produce them. However, as some resources are engrafted in the firms, market transactions are sometimes impossible. Partnership formation is a solution to the problem. Some firms aim to benefit from their partners' resources, such as technology while some firms combine their resources with others' in order to achieve competitive advantage.

Applying RBT to higher education, Kong and Prior (2008) state that higher education institutions acquire essential resources to accomplish their goals, such as developing human resources to deliver high-quality services.

RBT is also related to the internationalization process, and presents resource access as the major motivation of global alliance formation. Firms cooperate when it offers access to strategic resources at a lower cost than developing in-house. As an institution's given resources may not be adequate to gain competitive advantage in a particular market, they turn to partners with specific technical capabilities, managerial capabilities and other intangible resources (Hitt et al., 2000).

Technical capabilities are the ability to develop new processes or products efficiently (Dosi et al., 2001). As higher education institutions need to equip students with the knowledge and attitudes to cope with changing global landscape, technical capabilities are an important consideration in academic collaboration (Cortese, 2003).

Managerial capabilities are the ability of business managers to lead their firms efficiently and effectively (Hitt et al., 2000). In the higher education context, management capabilities can be applicable to both programme administration and pedagogical practice. Performance monitoring and troubleshooting are also important managerial capabilities. As the educational endeavour can be more complex than other forms of production (Sahney et al., 2004), involving many difficult to evaluate intangible outcomes, managerial capabilities are especially important.

Intangible resources are hard-to-observe non-physical factors expected to generate future economic benefits for firms (Galbreath, 2005; Peng, 2006). Intellectual property assets and reputational assets (i.e. brand and reputation) are examples. Partnering with prestigious institutions can increase one's own standing in the market. Reputation plays a critical role in both student and faculty selection and the acquisition of external resources and funding.

According to RBT, institutions possessing more technical capabilities, managerial capabilities and intangible resources will be seen as more attractive partners in the international market. The logic follows that more attractive institutions are more likely to attract potential partners, as well as create higher satisfaction among those they partner with (Shah and Swaminathan, 2008).

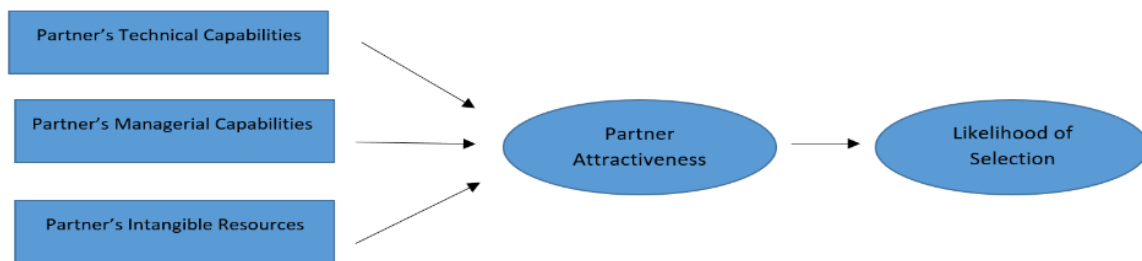


Figure 1: Preliminary model of the relationship between an institution's capabilities and resources and its likelihood of being seen as a desirable partner.

International higher education in Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Japan

Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Japan are all highly developed Asian economies, and Marginson (2011) categorizes each as having a 'post-Confucian' East Asian higher education model. While the three do share some common characteristics, there are also clear differences in how each organizes and approaches higher education. Nonetheless, each has heavily prioritized some form of internationalization throughout the 21st century and has seen significant rises in the number of international students and scholars as well as cooperative relationships between domestic and overseas HEIs.

We chose these three contexts because they offered an interesting opportunity to observe how international partner selection manifests itself across three contexts within the region which share a number of commonalities as well as differences. We looked exclusively at large research intensive publicly funded universities or autonomous units affiliated with those universities that offered international joint, dual, double or concurrent degree programmes. In some instances, the institutions themselves are born out of partnerships between local and overseas universities. Our investigation included analysis of primary and secondary documentation related to international educational partnerships, as well as interviews with individuals from within the institutions.

To better understand the approach to partnership selection in each context, it is helpful to have a brief overview of IoHE in each context.

In HK's government funded universities, internationalization has resulted in a major rise in the number of non-local students. There were only about 2,800 international students in 2003. The figure rose to 26,600 in 2012 and even to 30,000 in 2014, representing a 10-fold increase between 2003 and 2014. The revenue generated by the internationalization of higher education was almost HK\$2,000 million in 2014 (Lee, 2014). Since the late 2000s, the government has announced different approaches to support its development into an international education hub. First, it promotes actively the advantages of studying in HK to foreign students, for example the existence of world-class universities and serving as a

gateway for foreign students to enter the mainland China market. Also, the quota for foreign students studying in HK increased from 10% to 20% of the total student population in 2008.

Dealing with challenges created by an increasingly globalized economy, HK's education reforms aim to nurture in students qualities such as good ability in languages and mathematics, independence and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is a major goal of the education reform proposed by Tung Chee Hwa, the former HK SAR Chief Executive in 2000. To achieve the goal, the Hong Kong Education Commission devoted huge resources to provide more learning opportunities to the public. Consequently, the number of master programmes offered in HK, specifically in the Finance discipline, almost doubled from 2000-2002. With the increasing number of competitors, flexibility in partnership arrangement, such as the areas of the joint programme's content and admission requirements was essential. Flexibility, the ability to make changes according to different situations, is the one of elements that cannot be neglected in the increasingly competitive world.

Singapore stands out as a country that has long promoted internationalization as a matter of national policy (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009; Daquila 2013). Its size, location and colonial heritage have given it a natural outward looking tendency, and the state has taken a pragmatic approach to welcoming and attracting foreign influence (Gopinathan and Lee 2011). Economic and education policy are closely linked, and foreign partnerships and alliances are seen as critical to development in both areas (Gopinathan 2007; Koh 2011; Tan 2010; Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2011). Thus, the Singaporean government aims to capitalize on globalization as a means to national development, and has created an overarching policy framework that explicitly supports, and often directly funds partnerships. As such, partners at both the national and institutional levels are often invited (and financed) specifically to help develop local programs and capacity. As an example, both the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) have participated in state-orchestrated large-scale joint ventures (i.e. Duke-NUS, NTU-ICL, SMART). Partnerships have for several decades now been integral to the Singaporean state strategy for self-development to be leveraged to effectively build up faculties and programmes, improve reputation, diversify the student population, provide study abroad opportunities, secure funding, attract external expertise, and recruit faculty and students. Because of this self-development rationale, it is far more common

for Singaporean HEIs to partner with prestigious North American and European HEIs than other institutions in and around Asia.

Japan has also as a matter of national policy pursued and invested in IoHE. However, Japanese policymakers do not exhibit such a clear unified view of the relationship between internationalization and educational development. Though there are a large number of government driven projects and initiatives, there is less of an overarching policy framework (Yonezawa 2010; Horie 2015; Sanders, 2018). While partnerships are not as central to state internationalization policy as in Singapore, initiatives such as the 2012 Reinventing Japan Project supported recipient universities in creating partnerships and credit recognition schemes with universities abroad (as of July 1, 2019 on the MEXT website:

<http://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/highered/title02/detail02/1373875.htm>).

Interestingly, though there is a general sentiment within Japan that the higher education sector is in need of reform, international partnerships are often more focused on developing external networks and relationships, especially with HEIs in Southeast Asia, then about transforming the educational programmes and opportunities available within the domestic institutions.

Key considerations in partner selection

Our investigation identified twelve common attributes that influenced international partner selection for HEIs in these three contexts. Eleven of these twelve fit neatly within RBT's three criteria areas of technical capabilities, managerial capabilities and intangible resources. Indeed, the attributes within these three areas were found to determine the *attractiveness* of potential partners. However, the twelfth attribute was often the deciding factor of whether or not a partnership would move forward; and that is the presence of an existing relationship, be it at an institutional or personal level.

Across all institutions, important benefits of partnerships were cited as exchange of ideas in strategic areas, leveraging partners' unique strengths, diversifying education and research, creating opportunities that could not be achieved to the same effect locally, enhancing opportunities for 'global education', academic and research collaboration, and securing external funds. Interviewees also noted the importance of a sound strategy around and criteria for

partnerships at the university, school and programme levels. Such criteria should consider status, expertise and location of potential partner, levels of faculty interest in pursuing the partnership, motivation for and potential benefit of the partnership, the availability of funding, and evidence that they could not achieve the same results without involvement from the potential partner. These considerations for engaging in partnerships and selecting partners can be organized and categorized within RBT's three criteria areas (Figure 2). The following sections will briefly outline the components of these criteria areas and how they influence partner attractiveness.

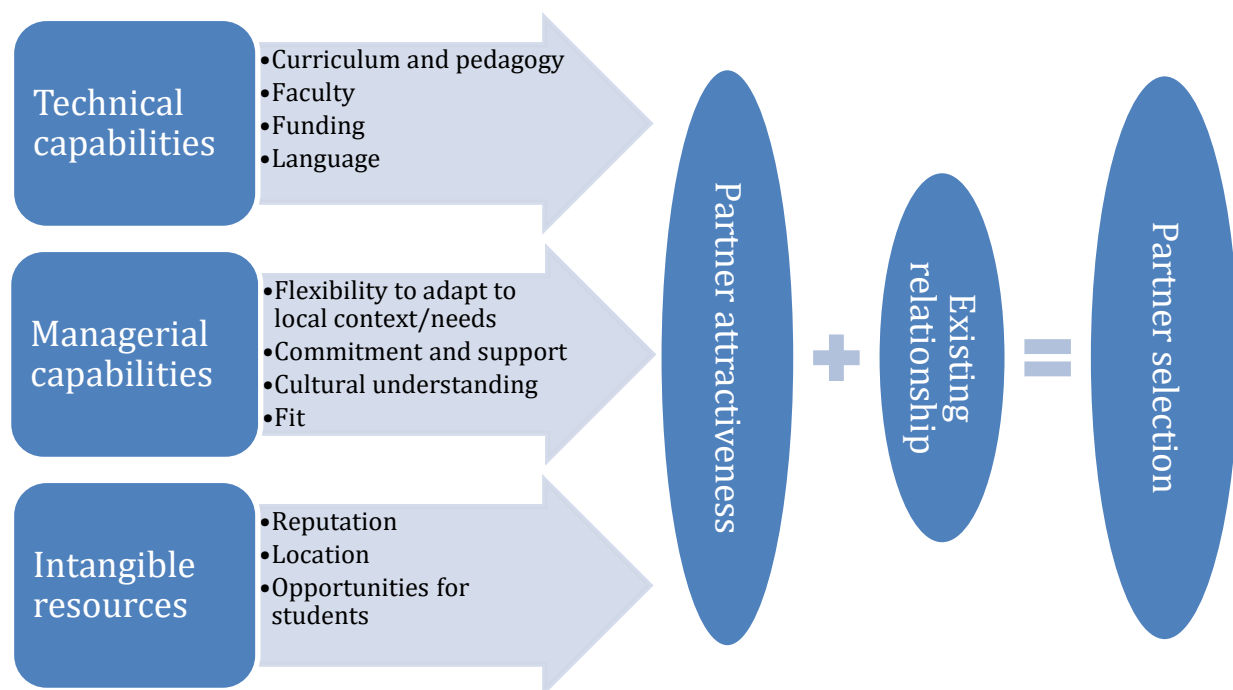


Figure 2: Enhanced model of partner selection

Technical capabilities

International partnerships are a way for HEIs to take advantage of resources and capabilities that are inherent to another institution. Knowledge or technology are easy examples. This desire to acquire the technical capabilities of foreign HEIs was often the case with the Singapore and HK cases, and they were often the baseline criteria for partner selection in these two contexts. Singapore and HK HEIs often applied their own pedagogies in delivering the curriculum of their foreign partners. As the partnerships were generally used as a medium to enhance their own programmes and offerings, they looked almost exclusively for partners that contributed well

developed content and pedagogy as well as skilled faculty. The Singaporean example of Duke-NUS, helps to make this clear. The Singaporean government wanted to develop the nation's graduate medical education capacity, and imported Duke's curriculum nearly in its entirety along with the partnership. There was a clear desire to acquire the partner's technical capabilities and apply them locally.

Funding and resourcing was also an important factor for most institutions. It was critical that partners would have the resources to be able to contribute adequately to the partnership. In some cases, partners were considered specifically because of the funding that they were able to bring to the endeavour. One Japanese interviewee noted that partnerships with Chinese HEIs were becoming increasingly attractive to Japanese faculty due to the amount of funding and willingness to invest that the partners brought with them.

Language is another example of a technical capability that influences partner selection.

Interviewees in the Singaporean cases mentioned that the use of English was also a baseline criterion for partnering on educational programmes in particular. Similarly, HK HEIs tended to partner with English or Chinese speaking institutions. Conversely, interviewees in the Japanese HEIs noted the challenges of collaborating on educational programmes due to the language barriers. English-medium programmes are increasing in Japan, but they are still rather limited. Partners were sometimes used to expand the local HEI's ability to offer content in English.

Managerial capabilities

Managerial capabilities are the ability of business managers to lead their firms efficiently and effectively (Hitt et al., 2000; Dosi et al., 2001). Such capabilities are particularly important in managing stakeholders from different cultural contexts. Within the pool of potential partners that met the technical capability criteria, managerial capabilities played a strong role in helping the local institutions feel comfortable in pursuing the partnership, and were often cited as the factors that most contributed to the partnerships success.

Commitment is essential to be attractive partner. A senior programme director of one of the HK programmes mentioned the dedication from their American partner and the great enthusiasm that the partner's programme team exhibited in devoting much effort to organize a series of forums

and professional workshops for potential students in Hong Kong. Besides, the partner's staff were very motivated and helped the HK institution conduct a survey to collect suggestions from the students on their topics of interest and solicited support from industry speakers to give talks on these topics. A dean at a Singapore joint venture spoke at length about the importance of the commitment and involvement from leadership the American HEI. This was viewed as absolutely crucial to the project's success.

“I think there a couple reasons that [the partnership] has been very successful. One of the reasons is that [the University] sent some of its best people here to be on the ground and live here from the very beginning...”

Flexibility in the partnership arrangement is another major factor affecting partner selection. One HK interviewee cited the example of their American partner's willingness to implement changes in the programme content and admission requirements so as to increase the programme's competitiveness in the local market. Various changes were carried out before the partnership formation for the purpose of increasing the joint programme's competitiveness. For instance, most HK students expect content to specifically help them prepare for a particular certification exam after graduation. With a view to achieving a greater parallel with the certification examination syllabus, the programme curriculum was revised with the addition of three new elective modules before the partnership formation.

'Fit' was also cited across all three contexts. On the Japanese side, the institutions often developed partnerships with the specific aim of strengthening their connection to and network within the partner's country, particularly those within Southeast Asia. Thus, many of the partners were viewed as not having quite the same level of research capacity as the Japanese HEIs. So when identifying partners for collaborative graduate programmes, they looked for partner programmes that would fit well with what they already had in place and would be flexible enough to adapt to the Japanese models, while maintaining a certain standard of quality.

Intangible resources

In the higher education context, intangible resources were found to be extremely important in partnership selection. Paramount among these is institutional reputation. A partner's reputation

and the success of a partnership are sometimes though not always linked, but reputation and ranking certainly play a role in the initial selection of the partner. For instance, in speaking about one of their highly ranked Australian partners, an interviewee in HK commented,

[The University] is an attractive university to our students as it had a high satisfaction rate in the specific category of employability in the recent QS World University Ranking. There are many outstanding alumni in the university... This surely enhances the local students' confidence in the joint programme between our institution and the university. Therefore, we selected it as our partner mainly because of its reputation.

The Singaporean HEIs have an explicit strategy of developing their own programmes and standing through association with prestigious and reputable overseas, primarily Western, institutions. According to former NTU President Cham, "We can't afford to be world leaders in every area. We will be leaders in niche areas and we will achieve this by working with world renowned universities and good industry partners" (quoted in Leong, 2002, p. 2-7). The Japanese cases had a significantly different profile of institutional partner, heavily focused within the region. Nonetheless, though less concerned with global reputation, they specifically targeted the most prestigious HEI's in their respective countries. This was seen as important in helping them reach the local student market in those countries.

The partner's ability to enhance other institution's internationalization is also a great motivation for partner selection. Take as an example the partnership between a HK and European HEI that provides numerous exchange opportunities for the students, and hence assists to enhance the HK HEI's internationalization. Through these exchange opportunities, students can immerse themselves in a new cultural context. The global network and global presence of the HK HEI has been built gradually with the assistance of its European partner. The partner's ability to enhance the local institution's internationalization greatly motivated the institution to select it as a partner. In the Singaporean cases, partnerships were seen as critical in reaching their study abroad targets for their undergraduate students. Conversely, in Japan, the joint programmes were seen as an important tool in increasing the number of international students on their campuses and helping the universities to demonstrate a more 'global' profile.

Location of the partner was another key factor. Some interviewees noted challenges in establishing partnerships in particular locations. For example, a competitive mind-set made it difficult for Singaporean and Hong Kong universities to partner. The Japanese cases noted difficulties in establishing joint programmes due to differences in academic calendar. The Singaporean cases, while primarily targeting the West, were beginning to turn towards more Asian partners for strategic reasons. Japanese interviewees focused heavily on relationships within ASEAN, citing history, potential for opportunity, personal networks of faculty, and a general desire to strengthen ties with the region. Activity in ASEAN is seen in terms of a long-term strategy of investing in the development of the region to build a strong foundation for future collaboration. One interviewee commented: “I think investment for the future is very very important.”

The importance of existing connections

While the above attributes were influential in establishing the attractiveness of potential partners, it was more often than not the existence of an already established relationship that determined whether or not to pursue a joint educational programme with a particular partner. Faculty involvement and support are considered of utmost importance in both establishing and maintaining educational partnerships, as they are generally the ones overseeing day to day delivery and operations of the joint ventures. Thus, all cases looked for evidence of existing collaboration before considering institution-wide agreements or joint programmes. This was typically facilitated through databases which tracked ongoing faculty-level agreements. Most partnerships had evolved from strong and long-standing exchange and collaboration relationships, which requires widespread faculty support and maintenance within the school or college that maintains the partnership. As leadership from one Japanese institution expressed it, “We have to have certain experience in particular universities. That is the collaboration and research and education. That is the base to choose.”

While strategic objectives to increase the number of partnerships were common, interviewees often expressed a desire to expand and deepen existing partnerships rather than continue to pursue new ones. Partnerships were recognized as a critical part of the higher education endeavour going forward, and all wanted to move into deeper and more expansive partnerships.

Personal connections and networks of leadership also proved to be a critical factor in developing partnerships, although the nature of this influence took on a variety of forms. Many of the high profile partnerships in Singapore were directly tied to the overseas experiences and the relationships built during them of the leadership of the Singaporean universities. Similarly, one Japanese interviewee noted the role of an international student programme from the 1970's played in partnership formation. Many of the Southeast Asian students who came to study in Japan under that programme went on to assume leadership posts at HEIs in their home countries. This helped to facilitate the current development of partnerships with those institutions.

Differences between the contexts

While the three contexts shared many similarities in their approach to international partner selection, there are some important differences. Singapore has a high level of government support, but also direct steering and intervention when they want to pursue a particular partnership. Hong Kong has a supportive policy environment, but less direct intervention. Japan had less government intervention and steering, and in the case of national universities often restrictive policies. The differing nature of the policy environments in the three contexts may be related to their respective stages of development. Contrary to Singapore and HK, Japan's higher education sector is not in a stage of growth, and there is less of a perceived need to bring in foreign providers to create new programmes locally. Hence the lower policy support for Japanese HEIs to work with overseas providers to develop new domestic programmes.

The Japanese cases do not tend to rely on their partners' brands to increase their international reputation or recruit international students to the extent that the Hong Kong and Singaporean cases do. Overall, the Singapore cases are somewhat dependent on their partnerships to maintain their educational offerings, research activities, and international (and national) standing. The Japanese cases are more independent in this regard and freer to develop partnerships with less of a competitive mind-set. As a result, although the Japanese cases do tend to partner with elite universities in a given country, they work with a wider more balanced portfolio of countries, with less emphasis on the 'West' and more involvement in developing contexts; particularly within the region. Even though the Japanese cases did not share the same self-development rationale for partnerships as the Singaporean and Hong Kong cases, they nonetheless pursued

international partnerships when they felt they were advantageous in obtaining 'resources' which we difficult to acquire locally. These include access to the Southeast Asian student market, access to research sites, and opportunities to increase the presence and promote their brand in the local markets if not globally. It also provides them the opportunity to promote themselves as more internationalized, and area in which they are often critiqued as being underdeveloped in. Thus, while the Japanese cases do not seem to be seeking partners for their technical and managerial capabilities, but certainly for the intangible resources that the partnership offers.

Few of the partners in HK and Singapore were from within the region, whereas most in Japan were. In Singapore and HK, the joint programmes primarily serve to benefit local students by offering credentials from prestigious foreign HEIs. In Japan, the programmes examined were primarily to help local HEIs attract students from the partner's country, and are less for domestic students. The different nature of joint programmes can be understood as a function of the local markets. In Singapore and HK, degrees from prestigious overseas universities are often highly valued in the market, and may be seen as superior to local degrees. In the Japanese market, however, foreign degrees are rarely seen as preferable to degrees from top domestic providers. Therefore, there is relatively less market value or incentive for Japanese students to want or need an association with a foreign institution. Thus, local contextual factors, such as industry demand, may have a significant effect on the nature of such collaborations.

Limitations of applying RBT

The clearest limitation of applying RBT to international educational partnerships for HEIs is the prevalence of pre-existing relationships. This has much to do with the need to establish trust in order to pursue long-term cooperative agreements. Shah and Swaminathan (2008) remind us of the importance of trust in governing and coordinating alliances. They state that benevolence and competence are the two dimensions of trust. Benevolence-based trust shows the extent that partners in an alliance will rely on the partner's goodwill and avoid opportunism. Competence-based trust reflects the willingness of partners to rely on each other's capabilities, and judgments. They suggest that trust is especially essential in alliance where intangible measures of outcomes exist, such as academic partnership. While benevolence (or commitment) and competence (or technical capabilities) are inherent in the attributes we assigned to the areas within RBT, it is the

existing relationship that over time allows intuitional members the trust needed to pursue the deeper partnership.

Because it is taken from the business sector, RBT focuses primarily on partnerships for competitive advantage. However, in some instances, rationales for partnerships had less to do with competition than collaborative contribution toward global issues and initiatives, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In these instances, partners were not necessarily selected to enhance the prestige of the local HEI or to help develop its own programmes and offerings for domestic students. Rather, partnerships were often formed based on a shared set of aims or values. This social responsibility rationale does not squarely fit within the hypothesized selection criteria in RBT.

Conclusion

This investigation sought to determine the applicability of the business sector's RBT to international educational partnerships between higher education institutions. With some important caveats (i.e. the existence of previous relationships), the motivations of the HEIs for selecting their partners did fit rather nicely within RBT's three main attribute areas. However, what is particularly striking is that although we approached the phenomena through the completely different theoretical framework of the RBT, the results of our investigation align to a great degree with those of Sakamoto and Chapman (2011), reinforcing the importance of these factors in international partner selection.

As a result, we can have a considerable amount of confidence in our understanding of what makes a higher education institution an attractive partner. International partnerships and collaboration will most likely continue to expand and become increasingly commonplace in the sector. Armed with the understanding of what makes an attractive partner, HEIs globally can develop and communicate their unique technical capabilities, managerial capabilities and intangible resources to better enable them to participate in and take advantage of the benefits that international partnerships afford.

Such benefits include self-development, access to local markets, and cooperative contribution to greater global goods. It is critical for universities to strive for excellence and continuously seek ways to improve their education and research. Partnerships can have a host of benefits in this regard, and these should be maximized. At the same time, global research universities have an important service mission and should utilize their capacity to contribute to the global public good (see Marginson, 2016). By focusing on these attributes and encouraging and supporting international relationships among their faculty and staff, HEIs can better position themselves to make increasingly positive contributions to their local and global communities.

This study also contributes to the literature of the internationalization of education from a strategic alliance perspective and has important implications for the decision makers of higher education institutions by offering guidelines on selecting an overseas university as a partner during the internationalization process. From the practical perspective, the top management staff can refer to the findings in the study when formulating new partner selection strategies or reviewing their existing relevant policies and practices.

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