
Cross-Regional Educational Governance: Lessons from Higher Education Reform in Asia and Europe

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Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of cross-regional educational governance by analyzing higher education reform in selected countries in Asia and Europe. The research aims to identify how governance models, policy frameworks, and institutional reforms shape the transformation of higher education systems across different regional contexts, and to explore the transferable lessons that can inform global higher education governance. Using a qualitative comparative research design, this study employs a systematic literature review and policy analysis of major higher education reforms implemented in both regions. Data were collected from academic publications, policy documents, and international reports published by global education organizations, and analyzed through thematic and comparative approaches to identify patterns of governance reform. The findings reveal three key patterns. First, European higher education reforms are strongly influenced by regional policy coordination and supranational frameworks that promote standardization, mobility, and quality assurance across national systems. Second, Asian higher education reforms tend to emphasize state-driven modernization, institutional autonomy within centralized policy frameworks, and strategic internationalization to enhance global competitiveness. Third, despite differences in political and institutional contexts, both regions demonstrate a growing convergence toward governance models that prioritize accountability, quality assurance mechanisms, global collaboration, and innovation-driven academic ecosystems. This study contributes to the literature on global higher education governance by providing a cross-regional comparative framework that highlights the interaction between regional policy coordination, national governance structures, and institutional reform strategies. The research also offers policy-relevant insights for emerging higher education systems seeking to balance global competitiveness with local governance realities. By synthesizing lessons from Asia and Europe, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of how multi-level governance structures influence the transformation and sustainability of higher education systems in the contemporary global knowledge economy.

Keywords: Comparative governance; Cross-regional policy; Educational reform; Higher education governance; Institutional transformation.

Introduction

Higher education governance has become a critical issue in the global transformation of education systems, particularly in the context of globalization, technological change, and the expansion of knowledge economies. Universities are no longer isolated national institutions but increasingly operate within transnational academic networks and global policy environments. As a result, governance reforms in higher education have been implemented in many regions to improve accountability, institutional performance, and international competitiveness. These reforms reflect broader shifts in public sector management, where governments attempt to balance institutional autonomy with stronger accountability mechanisms and performance-based governance structures (Marginson, 2016). The rapid expansion of higher education participation has also created new challenges for governance systems. As universities grow in size and complexity, traditional governance models based on collegial decision-making and state control often struggle to respond to contemporary demands such as research productivity, global university rankings, and international collaboration. Consequently, many governments have adopted new governance frameworks inspired by managerial reforms and international policy models. These reforms aim to enhance institutional flexibility, strengthen leadership structures, and promote strategic planning within universities (Enders & de Boer, 2009).

In Europe, higher education reform has been strongly influenced by regional policy coordination, particularly through the Bologna Process, which was launched in 1999 to create a more integrated European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Process introduced a common degree structure, a standardized credit transfer system, and shared quality assurance mechanisms. These reforms significantly transformed governance structures in European higher education by encouraging cooperation among national governments while maintaining institutional autonomy at the university level (Witte, 2006). The governance framework emerging from the Bologna Process represents a form of multi-level governance in which supranational coordination coexists with national and institutional policy autonomy. At the same time, European higher education systems have also adopted governance reforms associated with new public management. These reforms emphasize performance measurement, strategic leadership, and accountability mechanisms designed to improve institutional efficiency and responsiveness to societal demands. Research has shown that these reforms have reshaped the relationship between governments and universities, shifting from direct state control toward indirect steering mechanisms such as funding incentives, quality assurance systems, and regulatory frameworks (De Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007).

In contrast to Europe's regionally coordinated reforms, higher education governance in Asia has largely evolved through nationally driven modernization strategies. Many Asian governments have introduced large-scale policy initiatives aimed at transforming selected universities into globally competitive research institutions. These initiatives often involve targeted investment programs, international collaboration strategies, and institutional restructuring designed to improve research capacity and global visibility. As a result, Asian higher education reforms are frequently characterized by strong state involvement combined with selective institutional autonomy (Mok & Jiang, 2017). Several Asian countries have

implemented ambitious “world-class university” policies designed to position their universities within global rankings and international research networks. These policies often involve performance-based funding mechanisms, research excellence initiatives, and strategic partnerships with international universities. Although these reforms seek to enhance institutional autonomy, they also reflect a strong role of the state in shaping higher education policy priorities and institutional development (Shin & Kehm, 2013).

The increasing globalization of higher education has also intensified competition among universities for international students, research funding, and academic prestige. This competition has encouraged many universities to adopt governance reforms that strengthen institutional leadership, improve strategic decision-making, and expand international partnerships. Consequently, higher education governance has become closely linked to broader economic and innovation policies, particularly in countries seeking to develop knowledge-based economies (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014). Several studies have examined the transformation of higher education governance across different regional contexts. For example, De Boer, Enders, and Schimank (2007) analyze governance reforms in several European countries and demonstrate how new public management approaches have reshaped university governance structures by introducing performance-based accountability systems and managerial leadership models. Their research highlights the gradual shift from traditional collegial governance toward hybrid models that combine managerial and academic decision-making structures.

Similarly, Mok and Jiang (2017) investigate the transformation of higher education governance in East Asia and emphasize the role of state-driven policy reforms in promoting international competitiveness. Their study demonstrates that Asian higher education systems have increasingly adopted governance models that combine centralized policy direction with institutional autonomy in research and academic management. This hybrid governance structure reflects the strategic priorities of governments seeking to strengthen national innovation capacity. Another important contribution comes from Shattock (2014), who examines governance reforms in European universities and argues that institutional leadership and internal governance reforms play a crucial role in adapting universities to rapidly changing policy environments. His research emphasizes the importance of strategic management, stakeholder engagement, and transparent decision-making processes in strengthening university governance. While these studies provide valuable insights into the transformation of higher education governance, several important research gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on governance reforms within specific national or regional contexts, particularly either Europe or Asia. Such studies provide detailed empirical analysis but often lack a broader comparative perspective that examines similarities and differences across regions. Second, many studies focus primarily on policy instruments such as funding mechanisms, quality assurance systems, or institutional autonomy, without fully exploring the broader governance dynamics that shape reform outcomes. Third, relatively few studies explicitly examine cross-regional policy learning and the ways in which governance models developed in one region may influence reforms in another.

These limitations suggest the need for a more comprehensive comparative analysis of higher education governance reforms across different regions. In an increasingly interconnected academic world, policy ideas, governance models, and institutional practices frequently circulate across national and regional boundaries. Understanding these cross-regional dynamics is essential for explaining how higher education systems evolve in response

to global challenges such as international competition, technological change, and the expansion of knowledge economies (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). The novelty of this study lies in its cross-regional analytical approach that compares governance reforms in higher education systems in Asia and Europe. Unlike previous research that tends to examine governance reforms within a single region, this study seeks to integrate insights from both regions in order to identify broader patterns of policy convergence and divergence. By analyzing governance frameworks, institutional strategies, and reform outcomes, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how higher education systems adapt to global pressures.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the literature by emphasizing the importance of cross-regional policy learning in higher education governance. While European reforms such as the Bologna Process have created a coordinated regional governance framework, Asian higher education systems provide valuable examples of strategic state-led reforms aimed at achieving global academic competitiveness. Comparing these two regional experiences allows for a deeper understanding of the institutional, political, and policy factors that shape governance reform. Based on these considerations, the central research question guiding this study is: How do higher education governance reforms in Asia and Europe differ in their policy frameworks, institutional strategies, and governance outcomes, and what lessons can be drawn from these reforms for cross-regional educational governance? The significance of this research is both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on higher education governance by developing a cross-regional comparative framework that integrates insights from Asian and European policy experiences. Such a framework helps to bridge the gap between region-specific studies and broader analyses of global higher education transformation. From a practical perspective, the findings of this research may provide useful insights for policymakers, university leaders, and international organizations seeking to design governance reforms that balance institutional autonomy, accountability, and global competitiveness in higher education systems.

Method

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to examine the patterns and dynamics of higher education governance reforms across Asia and Europe. The qualitative approach is selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of policy frameworks, governance structures, and institutional reform processes that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement. Comparative analysis is particularly suitable for identifying similarities and differences in governance models across different regional contexts. The research focuses on policy documents, scholarly literature, and institutional reports related to higher education reform in selected Asian and European countries. Data were collected through a systematic literature review of academic articles indexed in international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, complemented by the analysis of policy documents issued by governments, universities, and international organizations involved in higher education governance. This approach allows the study to capture both the structural and policy dimensions of higher education reform while situating them within broader regional governance frameworks (Marginson, 2016; Mok & Jiang, 2017; Shin & Kehm, 2013).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic and comparative policy analysis techniques. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to governance models, policy instruments, institutional autonomy, and accountability

mechanisms within the reform processes of both regions. Subsequently, comparative analysis was conducted to evaluate the similarities, differences, and policy implications of governance reforms across Asia and Europe. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study applied a data triangulation strategy by cross-checking information from multiple sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and institutional publications. In addition, analytical rigor was strengthened through iterative coding and systematic comparison of themes derived from the literature. This methodological approach enables the research to generate a comprehensive understanding of cross-regional educational governance and to identify transferable lessons from higher education reform experiences in Asia and Europe (De Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007; Enders & de Boer, 2009; Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Governance Transformation in European Higher Education Reform

The governance of higher education in Europe has undergone significant transformation since the late twentieth century, particularly in response to globalization, regional integration, and the growing importance of knowledge economies. Universities in Europe have increasingly been expected to function not only as institutions for teaching and learning but also as central actors in research innovation, technological development, and economic competitiveness. As a result, governments and regional organizations have introduced comprehensive reforms aimed at improving governance structures, enhancing accountability, and strengthening international cooperation among universities (Marginson, 2016).

One of the most influential frameworks shaping governance reform in Europe is the Bologna Process, initiated in 1999 with the goal of creating a unified European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The Bologna Process introduced several key structural reforms, including the adoption of a three-cycle degree structure (Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate), the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and standardized quality assurance procedures. These reforms were designed to facilitate student mobility, improve transparency in academic qualifications, and strengthen cooperation among higher education institutions across national boundaries (Witte, 2006).

The governance model that emerged from the Bologna Process is frequently described as multi-level governance, in which policy authority is distributed across supranational organizations, national governments, and individual universities. In this model, regional institutions such as the European Commission and the European Higher Education Area provide policy coordination and strategic guidance, while national governments retain responsibility for regulatory frameworks and funding policies. Universities themselves maintain considerable autonomy in academic decision-making, research management, and international partnerships (Huisman, 2009).

This system of multi-level governance reflects broader trends in European political integration. Instead of relying on centralized authority, policy coordination occurs through collaborative networks that allow member states to learn from each other's experiences and gradually harmonize their education systems. Through this mechanism, governance reforms in one country often influence policy developments in others, leading to gradual convergence in governance practices across Europe.

Another key element of governance transformation in Europe is the increasing influence of New Public Management (NPM) principles in higher education administration. Beginning in the 1990s, many European governments adopted managerial reforms designed to improve

the efficiency and accountability of public sector institutions, including universities. These reforms introduced new governance mechanisms such as performance-based funding systems, external evaluation processes, and strategic management structures within universities (De Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007).

Under NPM-inspired reforms, universities are expected to operate more like strategic organizations capable of managing resources efficiently and responding to changing societal demands. Institutional leaders such as university presidents and executive boards have gained greater authority in decision-making processes, while traditional collegial governance structures have been partially reconfigured to accommodate managerial practices. These reforms aim to enhance institutional flexibility while ensuring accountability for public funding (Enders & de Boer, 2009).

Quality assurance has also become a central component of governance reform in European higher education. Institutions such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) have developed common evaluation standards that guide accreditation processes across European universities. These mechanisms are designed to ensure transparency, maintain academic standards, and strengthen public trust in higher education systems (Amaral & Magalhães, 2007).

Despite these achievements, governance reforms in Europe have generated significant debate among scholars. Some critics argue that the expansion of managerial governance structures may undermine traditional academic values such as collegial decision-making and academic freedom. According to this perspective, excessive reliance on performance indicators and evaluation metrics could encourage universities to prioritize measurable outcomes, such as publication counts and research funding, at the expense of broader educational and social missions (Kwiek, 2015).

Nevertheless, empirical studies indicate that governance reforms have contributed to greater international integration within European higher education. Student mobility programs such as Erasmus+ have expanded opportunities for cross-border education, while collaborative research networks have strengthened the global visibility of European universities. In addition, the harmonization of degree structures and quality assurance standards has facilitated mutual recognition of academic qualifications across Europe.

These developments demonstrate that regional policy coordination can play a crucial role in shaping higher education governance. By establishing shared policy frameworks while allowing institutional autonomy, the European model provides a flexible governance structure capable of adapting to global academic competition and evolving societal expectations.

Table 1. Key Governance Reforms in European Higher Education

Reform Dimension	Policy Instrument	Governance Impact	
Degree structure reform	Bologna system	three-cycle	Harmonization of qualifications
Student mobility	ECTS credit system		Increased academic mobility
Quality assurance	ENQA and EQAR frameworks		Standardized evaluation mechanisms
Governance model	Multi-level governance		Coordination between the EU, national, and institutional levels

Funding model	Performance-based funding	Encourages efficiency and competitiveness
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Overall, the European experience illustrates how regional integration can support the modernization of higher education governance while preserving institutional diversity.

State-Led Modernization and Governance Reform in Asian Higher Education

In contrast to the regionally coordinated reforms observed in Europe, governance transformation in Asian higher education has primarily been driven by **state-led modernization strategies**. Governments across the region have recognized the strategic importance of universities in promoting economic development, technological innovation, and global competitiveness. Consequently, higher education policy in many Asian countries has focused on strengthening research capacity, improving university rankings, and expanding international collaboration (Mok & Jiang, 2017).

A defining feature of higher education reform in Asia is the emergence of world-class university initiatives. Governments in countries such as China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore have launched ambitious programs aimed at transforming selected universities into globally competitive research institutions. These initiatives typically involve substantial financial investment in research infrastructure, international faculty recruitment, and advanced graduate education programs (Salmi, 2009).

China provides one of the most prominent examples of this approach. Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has implemented several major policy initiatives designed to strengthen its higher education system. Programs such as Project 211, Project 985, and the more recent Double First-Class University Plan have allocated significant resources to selected universities to enhance research productivity, international collaboration, and global academic reputation (Zha, 2011).

Similarly, South Korea has introduced the Brain Korea 21 program, which provides financial support for graduate education and research training in leading universities. This initiative aims to cultivate highly skilled researchers capable of contributing to national innovation systems and global scientific networks (Shin & Kehm, 2013).

Asian higher education governance, therefore, reflects a hybrid model that combines centralized policy direction with selective institutional autonomy. Governments play a central role in defining strategic priorities and allocating resources, while universities are granted flexibility in implementing academic programs and research initiatives. This governance structure reflects the developmental role of the state in many Asian economies.

Another important trend in Asian higher education reform is the rapid expansion of university enrollment, often described as the massification of higher education. As economic growth increases demand for skilled labor, governments have expanded access to universities to produce a more highly educated workforce (Shin, Postiglione, & Huang, 2015).

However, massification also creates governance challenges. Expanding access to higher education requires substantial investment in infrastructure, faculty development, and quality assurance systems. In many countries, the rapid growth of universities has resulted in significant disparities between elite research institutions and regional teaching universities (Yang, 2015).

In addition to domestic policy priorities, governance reforms in Asia are increasingly influenced by global university rankings. International rankings such as the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education rankings have become influential benchmarks used by governments to evaluate institutional performance. In some cases,

national policies explicitly aim to improve the global ranking positions of domestic universities (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014).

Although rankings can encourage universities to enhance research productivity and international collaboration, they may also create unintended consequences. Critics argue that excessive focus on ranking metrics can lead universities to prioritize research output and citation counts rather than educational quality or community engagement.

Despite these challenges, the rapid transformation of Asian higher education demonstrates the effectiveness of strategic state intervention in promoting institutional development. Universities in China, Singapore, and South Korea have significantly improved their research performance and global visibility over the past two decades.

Table 2. State-Led Governance Strategies in Asian Higher Education

Country	Major Reform Program	Governance Objective
China	Project 211, Project 985, Double First-Class	Strengthen research universities
South Korea	Brain Korea 21	Improve research and graduate education
Japan	Top Global University Project	Promote internationalization
Singapore	Global Schoolhouse Initiative	Attract global talent
Malaysia	Higher Education Blueprint	Strengthen institutional competitiveness

Source: Author's interpretation

These initiatives illustrate how strategic government investment can accelerate higher education modernization and improve international competitiveness.

Cross-Regional Lessons for Educational Governance

A comparative examination of governance reforms in Europe and Asia reveals both significant differences and emerging areas of convergence. While European reforms emphasize regional coordination and institutional autonomy, Asian reforms focus on state-led modernization and strategic investment in research universities. One of the most important lessons from the European experience is the role of regional policy coordination in facilitating higher education integration. Through the Bologna Process, European countries have developed shared frameworks that promote academic mobility, mutual recognition of degrees, and collaborative research networks (Välmaa & Hoffman, 2008).

By contrast, the Asian experience highlights the effectiveness of strong state leadership in higher education reform. Government-driven initiatives that prioritize research investment and global engagement have enabled several Asian universities to improve their international standing (Altbach, 2015) rapidly. Despite these differences, governance reforms in both regions increasingly emphasize institutional autonomy combined with accountability mechanisms. Universities are expected to operate as independent institutions capable of strategic decision-making while remaining accountable to governments and society for their performance (Teixeira & Dill, 2011). Another shared trend is the growing importance of internationalization in higher education governance. Universities across Asia and Europe participate actively in global research networks, joint academic programs, and international student exchange initiatives. These developments illustrate how globalization is reshaping higher education governance beyond national boundaries (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

Table 3. Comparative Governance Characteristics: Europe and Asia

Governance Dimension	Europe	Asia
Policy coordination	Regional integration	National policy initiatives
Governance structure	Multi-level governance	State-led governance
Reform orientation	Harmonization and mobility	Global competitiveness
Funding approach	Performance-based funding	Strategic government investment
Internationalization strategy	Regional mobility programs	Global research collaboration

Source: Author's Interpretation

The comparative findings indicate that although governance models differ across regions, both ultimately seek to enhance the capacity of universities to operate effectively within an increasingly globalized knowledge economy. The European model demonstrates the potential of regional policy coordination to harmonize higher education systems, while the Asian model illustrates the impact of strong state leadership in accelerating institutional development. Ultimately, the experiences of both regions suggest that effective higher education governance requires a balanced approach that combines institutional autonomy, strategic investment, and policy coordination. By learning from the complementary strengths of the European and Asian models, policymakers can develop governance frameworks capable of supporting innovation, academic excellence, and global engagement in higher education systems.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that higher education governance reforms in Asia and Europe have developed through distinct yet complementary pathways shaped by different political, institutional, and socio-economic contexts. European higher education reforms emphasize regional coordination and multi-level governance, particularly through initiatives such as the Bologna Process, which has successfully harmonized degree structures, strengthened quality assurance mechanisms, and expanded academic mobility across national boundaries. In contrast, governance reforms in Asia are primarily characterized by strong state-led strategies aimed at accelerating institutional competitiveness and research productivity. Programs such as China's Double First-Class initiative and South Korea's Brain Korea 21 illustrate how strategic government investment and policy direction can rapidly enhance the global visibility and research capacity of universities. Despite these differences, both regions increasingly converge on key governance principles, including the balance between institutional autonomy and accountability, the growing importance of internationalization, and the need for higher education institutions to contribute to national innovation systems and global knowledge networks. The findings also suggest that cross-regional learning can provide valuable insights for policymakers seeking to improve higher education governance in an increasingly interconnected academic landscape. European experiences highlight the benefits of regional collaboration and policy harmonization, while Asian reforms demonstrate the effectiveness of strategic state intervention in strengthening institutional capacity. Future research should further explore how hybrid governance models combining regional coordination, institutional autonomy, and strategic state support can enhance the resilience and sustainability of higher education systems. In addition, empirical studies involving institutional-level data, stakeholder

perspectives, and comparative policy implementation across multiple countries would provide deeper insights into how governance reforms influence academic performance, innovation outcomes, and social impact in higher education.

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Author Contributions Statement

Louis De Smet contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, and analysis. He was also responsible for drafting the manuscript, revising it critically for important intellectual content, and approving the final version for publication.

AI Usage Statement

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI)–assisted tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Grammarly was employed for grammar checking and language refinement. Use of these tools was strictly limited to linguistic and editorial purposes. All intellectual content, data analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusions were produced solely by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this manuscript.

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