

# *English-Medium Instruction for the B&R Students in Chinese Universities: A Nation Branding Perspective*

Zhi-jun YAN, Jun WEN\*, Yong-jian ZONG

School of Economics & Management  
Nanjing University of Science & Technology  
Nanjing, China  
Email: njjustwen@126.com

**Abstract**—Nation branding has remained both a heated topic and an international tendency over years. As an endeavor to promote the international image and reputation of a country, nation branding is a multifaceted cause involving a host of domestic stakeholders, among which the higher education institutions play an ever increasingly important role. With its economic and social achievements in recent years, nation branding is also needed by China. For a long time, the function of Chinese universities in nation branding was indirect and marginal, but the Belt & Road Initiative as well as the drive for internationalization of higher education have altered this situation. However, due to language barriers, the universities' potential in nation branding has so far not been fully tapped. This paper argues that a wide and quality application of English-medium instruction in the teaching of academic subjects for the B&R students could substantially enhance the universities' role in promoting Brand China. Based on the interpretation and analysis, policy implications are discussed accordingly.

**Keywords**—*Nation branding; English-medium instruction (EMI); B&R students; Internationalization of higher education; Chinese universities*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Propelled by the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), which was unveiled by President Xi Jinping during his state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in the fall of 2013, as well as the drive for the internationalization of higher education, an ever-increasing number of Chinese universities are recruiting international students for degree programs in recent years. According to the statistics of China's Ministry of Education, up to 1,004 Chinese universities were involved in enrolling international students in 2018. In total, 492,185 international students from 196 countries and regions were studying in Chinese universities in 2018, among which 258,122 were degree students, including undergraduates and postgraduates, and more than 60 percent of the international students were from the Belt & Road (B&R) countries. Taken together, the B&R students have become a major source of Chinese school enrollment.

Similar to universities which enroll foreign students in many other countries, Chinese universities have to determine the medium of instruction that is employed in the education of the B&R students. Due to the facts that Chinese is not the first language (L1, the language which a person has learned from birth or within the critical period) of the B&R countries (Singapore might be an exception) and that very few B&R students' Chinese level is qualified enough to directly take Chinese-medium instruction degree programs, English, the only common denominator language that can cover all the B&R countries, is naturally chosen by Chinese universities as the medium of instruction for the B&R students. Indeed, there has been a rapid spread of English-medium instruction (EMI) among Chinese universities with more and more degree courses being taught in English in recent years.

Needless to say, the unprecedented large-scale enrolment of the B&R students as well as the following EMI application have posed a series of new challenges to Chinese universities. Never before have they experienced such a massive influx of international students who need EMI degree programs. More and more universities are scrambling to make ends meet in terms of faculty, textbooks, teaching programs, and the related library resources, English websites, and so forth, and a string of hitches, perplexities and even controversies concerning EMI have naturally followed. Under the circumstances, the quality of a number of the EMI programs in some universities leaves much to be desired.

In this paper, we argue that a quality EMI provision for the B&R students studying in Chinese universities could not only well help promote the BRI and the internationalization of China's higher education, but also, and in a broader sense, enhance China's nation branding initiative more in depth. A nation branding perspective approach can make EMI provision for the B&R students take on a renewed significance and should hopefully galvanize both the universities and the education authorities into taking further and more concerted action to improve the teaching and learning of EMI programs in Chinese universities.

---

The paper is financially supported by "Quality Program of Introduction to China's Foreign Trade for International College Students in Jiangsu Province 2018 and China's Ministry of Education Grant of School-enterprise Cooperation to Training, NO. 201801222008".

## II. NATION BRANDING, INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMI TEACHING

Nation branding, both as a theory and a practical approach, is the product of globalization. Entering the 1990s, the world witnessed a series of radical changes, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of Berlin Wall, the rapid penetration of the Internet, the founding of the World Trade Organization, and the unprecedented expansion of multilateral corporations across the world. All these changes en masse led to a new conjuncture where there emerged a trend of ever-increasing interconnectedness between countries all round the world. An umbrella term – globalization – was thus chosen by academia to describe this new phenomenon.

Globalization has delivered a tremendous impact virtually on every nation-state. As Simon Anholt (2002) has noted, “It does sometimes seem as if globalization is turning the world into a gigantic supermarket where nations are nothing more than products on the shelf, frantically trying to attract the attention of each passing consumer.[1]” On a unified international economic arena incurred by globalization, countries inevitably compete against each other for the outside resources that are both precious and rare, be it market shares, foreign direct investment, talents or international tourists. In order to stand out from the crowd and successfully catch the attention of the “passing consumer”, it is essential that countries be engaged in nation branding, which refers to the application of marketing communications techniques to promote a country’s international image. This is in line with what van Ham (2001) once concluded, “Smart states are building their brands around reputations and attitudes in the same way smart companies do” [2]. Indeed, over the past 10-20 years we have witnessed a proliferation of nation branding campaigns around the world, to name a few, “100% Pure New Zealand”, “I Feel Slovenia”, “Korea Sparkling”, and “Incredible India”, are cases in point.



Fig. 1. Simon Anholt’s Nation Brand Hexagon

Source: Simon Anholt (2005)

In terms of theoretical approaches, besides an ever-growing number of research papers and books published in recent years, it is noteworthy that in 2005 Simon Anholt developed the Nation Brands Index as a way to measure the image and reputation of the world’s countries. According to Simon Anholt, the nation brand is the sum of people’s perceptions of a

country’s national competence across six dimensions, namely, exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, immigration and investment. Together, these six dimensions make what is called the Nation Brand Hexagon (See Fig. 1). Since 2008, the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index is released annually, which provides national governments and their agencies with a one-of-a-kind resource for actionable insights needed to more effectively manage a country’s reputation. In 2018, among the 50 countries/regions in the Anholt-GfK Roper “nation brand” ranking, Germany ranked first, followed by Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Italy, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden and Australia.

Education is not selected as one of the dimensions in the above mentioned nation brand index, but this does not mean that it is not important in a country’s nation branding. As a matter of fact, Simon Anholt did stress education’s role in nation branding, as he once pointed out that “good products, services, culture, tourism, investments, technology, education, businesses, people, policies, initiatives, and events produced by a good country also acquire a positive brand image, which eventually reflects on the country, and perhaps also becomes its principal asset” [3]. Education in general, higher education in particular, functions fundamentally behind every of the six dimensions in the nation brand hexagon and plays a pivotal role in a country’s efforts of nation branding. This is easily understandable by just considering the relationship between education and a country’s exports, people, and culture. Indeed, the above mentioned top 10 countries in the 2018 nation brand ranking are all strong in their education, especially in higher education.

Just as globalization has changed business around the world, it is noteworthy that it has also changed the face of education. In an ever-globalizing context, higher education institutions, universities in developed countries in particular, have tended to be more outward looking and more international. Thus a new phenomenon – internationalization of higher education, emerged in the 1990s as well. Generally speaking, internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service elements of an university, with as its main components the recruitment of international students, development of international branch campuses, students, staff and scholars exchange programs, internationalization of the curriculum, and research and education partnerships between universities regionally and internationally.

Obviously, the recruitment of international students is the centerpiece of internationalization of higher education activity. As a matter of fact, internationalization of higher education is accompanied and supported by incremental international student mobility. According to the report “Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators” released by the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), the number of foreign students engaged in tertiary education programs worldwide has exploded during the past few decades, rising from 2 million in 1999 to 5 million in 2016 [4]. In the OECD’s view, for foreign students, studying abroad is an opportunity for them to access quality education, acquire skills

that may not be taught at home and get closer to labor markets that offer higher returns on education.

On the part of the host country, foreign students studying in its universities are of course an important source of revenue in terms of tuition fees and living expenses. The universities can also lift their international profile, e.g., their positions in the world university rankings, by enrolling a large number of foreign students. But the benefit should be far beyond that for the host country if things are handled appropriately. In fact, the rise of internationalization of higher education together with the accompanying student mobility in recent years has led to higher education taking a new role in a country's nation branding initiative. This topic is of significant importance but remains largely unexplored so far.

Nation branding theory holds that a nation brand is the sum of people's perceptions of a country. In a fiercely competitive world, the degree to which a country is admired, trusted and respected can have direct economic and social impact on that country. People's assessment with regard to a foreign country in question may be based upon a series of factor, among which education plays a salient role [5]. However, it should be noted that the education mentioned by the researchers or practitioners in the field of nation branding basically refers to a country's domestic education in which the teachers and the students are both compatriots and natives. In the circumstances, students' knowledge acquired in the classroom and from the textbook about a foreign country is likely to be biased, incomplete and outdated. When this is reinforced by misleading propaganda and media, the chances are that a negative and stereotyped perception of the foreign country is thus formed and difficult to change. This is a nightmare for the foreign country involved when competing for and attracting the outside rare resources.

To some extent, internationalization of higher education is in a position to change this dismal scenario. If the host country has made substantial progress in its economy, science and technology, and its higher education been sophisticated enough to offer much to the outside world, then by successfully attracting large numbers of international students, its universities can make their contribution to nation branding efforts. Indeed, foreign students, especially those degree students who are to study in the university for a couple of years, can get first-hand acquaintance with the country wherein they study. They see with their own eyes, listen with their own ears and rub shoulders with the local student and everyday people, and most likely they would make tours of the country. When enough first-hand knowledge about the destination country, its people, history and culture is accumulated, a new objective, if not positive, impression of the country is gradually formed, which might be quite different from what they had before studying in the country. For example, Jeong Kyung Park, Yong Deog Kim, and Kaia DeMatteo (2016), by conducting a survey, find that the African students' experiences of living and studying in South Korea positively affected their perception of the country [6]. Given the fact that international students will be among the elite in their home country when they graduate and return home, their renewed opinion of the host country is likely to make a huge impact on the general public of their home country in the future.

It should be noted that the first and foremost motivation of the international students is to receive quality education which must be conducted via a medium of instruction. Based on the above-mentioned OECD report, the language of instruction is a strong determinant of students' choice of destination. Countries where the L1 is English can be particularly attractive to international students. Not surprisingly, Anglophone countries such as the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia are perennial top destination countries for international students. As mentioned above, these four countries are all among the top 10 in the 2018 Anholt-GfK Roper "nation brand" ranking. Indeed, according to the OECD, English is the lingua franca of this globalized world, to improve language skills, particularly English, constitute one of the main motivations of studying abroad as a result.

For the vast majority of non-English-speaking countries, English's global dominant position tends to be a "like-it-or-lump-it" fact and is hard to challenge already. What these countries can do is to embrace this trend by vigorously promoting EMI in their tertiary education, so as to improve their international competitiveness and attract more international students. Actually, this is exactly what a growing number of countries are doing right now. According to a 2014 report entitled "English as a medium of instruction – a growing global phenomenon" given by Julie Dearden, an Oxford University scholar, globally there is a general tendency towards a rapid expansion of EMI provision and there is official governmental backing for EMI [7]. Julie Dearden's findings are based on a study conducted in fifty-five countries/regions across the world. According to her report, the reasons for EMI introduction at the tertiary education level can be summarized as twofold, one is to provide opportunities for native students to study or work abroad, and the other is to attract international students. Based on our above analysis, the wide application of EMI in higher education will be conducive for those non-Anglophone countries to enroll more foreign students and hence open a new door for their nation branding.

### III. BRANDING CHINA, CHINESE UNIVERSITIES AND EMI TEACHING FOR THE B&R STUDENTS

More than a decade ago, Theresa Loo and Gary Davies (2006) raised such a question – is branding China the ultimate challenge in reputation management? [8] In their research, they argued that branding China is a daunting task by listing ten challenges facing the branding of the country. With regard to how to make a breakthrough in branding China, they suggested, inter alia, that "other changes in the country" should be examined and grasped. They did mention education by noting that there has been a massive investment in education such that China would soon match the United States in the number of doctoral degrees it awards, but stopped short of discussing Chinese universities' recruiting international students and their roles in China's nation branding. This is understandable, given the relatively small number of foreign students studying in China at the beginning of the 2000s.

Backed by the country's ever-increasing economic strength, China kick-started her ambitious internationalization of higher education program in the early 2010s. This has been greatly augmented by the BRI unveiled in 2013. As a result, the scale



of both the international students enrolled and the recipient universities took a quantum leap (See Fig. 2). Regarding the surges of the numbers of students and universities, based on the information released by China's Ministry of Education, there are a couple of things that should be noted: firstly, the proportion of degree students has substantially increased; secondly, more and more universities, a growing number of vocational and technical colleges included, have got involved in the education for international students; and thirdly, there has been a hike in the B&R student percentages, which rose from 45.4 percent in 2014 to 64.85 percent in 2017. This means that presently the bulk of the international degree students are from the B&R countries. With the continued advancement of the BRI, it can be reasonably expected that the proportion of the B&R degree students will continue to rise in the near future.

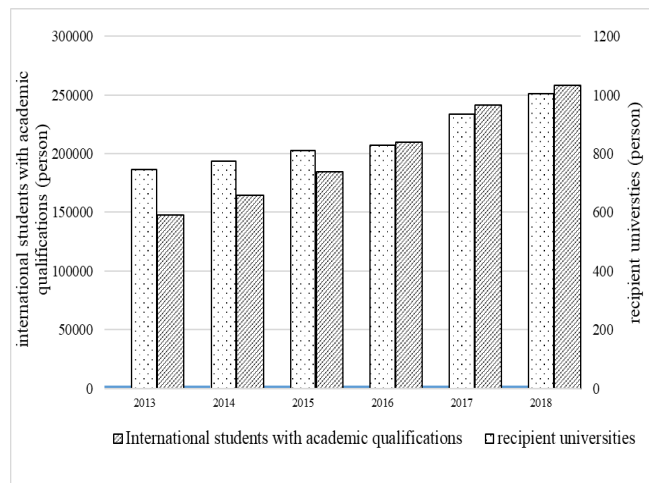


Fig. 2. Growth of International Students and Recipient Universities in China

Source: Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China

China's peaceful development in recent years has made a marked impact on the world. There has emerged some kind of ambivalence or even uneasiness, in developing and developed countries alike, toward China's quick rise. China needs, by promoting its nation brand, to show to the world that the essence of Brand China means peace, harmony, and mutual benefit. In branding China, "hard power" like exports, GDP, the number of Fortune 500 companies, and scientific and technological attainments is important and lays the foundation for nation branding, but "soft power", which is mainly embodied in culture, heritage, people, and education, plays a more pivotal role in branding the country. In China, like in many other countries, the hubs of soft power are primarily the higher education institutions. Until a few years ago, Chinese universities' role in nation branding was largely indirect and marginal, especially in terms of soft power projection. Now the BRI and the internationalization of higher education drive have made it possible for Chinese universities come to the fore and play a much more prominent part in branding China through the enrolment of international students. The universities thus become an emerging stakeholder in branding China.

The BRI offers a good opportunity for China to further its nation branding duo to increased cross-border student mobility. Along the B&R there are several dozens of developing as well as transition countries which are on good terms with China. The cooperation between China and the B&R countries is not just confined to economic areas, such as trade, investment and industrial parks, but illustrated in cultural and educational exchange as well. By delivering quality education programs to the B&R students, China can demonstrate to the world that the country boasts not only a "Made in China" brand, but also an "Educated in China" brand. This will be conducive to enriching the meaning of Brand China as well as enhancing the country's competitiveness in the realm of global tertiary education. However, in order to achieve the goals, teaching through EMI is a must for Chinese universities.

Indeed, more and more majors and universities in China have been involved in EMI. A search on the "Study-In-China" official website fully demonstrates this. But presently it seems that a number of universities are laying themselves out to attract international students with a major purpose to improve their positions in the university rankings, while relatively not much attention and resources are given to EMI provision and its quality. We hold that inadequate and poor quality EMI teaching is detrimental not only to the reputation of China's higher education but also to Brand China proper. In trying to attract the best students from the B&R countries, preferential treatments like offering handsome scholarships and better board and lodging conditions are necessary and important, especially in the initial stages of recruiting international students, but these generalized measures should be gradually replaced by more professional approaches similar to those in Western universities. The funding and resources should be more allocated to the teaching and learning of the EMI academic subjects and the related ancillary services. We believe that a quality EMI education in Chinese universities can stand the B&R students in good stead in their future careers and enable them to better serve their own countries as well as the BRI. Needless to say, this will considerably help promote China's nation branding in the B&R countries as well as in other parts of the world.

A nation branding perspective should make EMI for the B&R students take on an extended and much greater importance. For universities and the education authorities at all level, there seems a need to overhaul the EMI policy and take serious actions to perfect the existing EMI programs for the international students. Strict feasibility studies, rigorous procedures, and a gradual roll-out policy are much needed for the EMI programs. On the university level, which majors and academic subjects are qualified for EMI teaching, on the national level, which universities are entitled to enrolling international students, both the university and the education authorities should make their right decisions. On top of this, enough attention should be paid to and adequate resources allocated to improving the quality of the EMI programs.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Nearly twenty years ago, Olins (2002), one of the pioneers in the field of nation branding, pointed out that within the next decade or so the interest in branding the nation would become

“quite normal national practice” [9]. Now it seems that his prediction has been corroborated by the nation branding practices in many parts of the world. During the past two decades, China has already, by “Made in China” performance, demonstrated to the world that it is a convincing and trustworthy manufacturing power. But the country needs to make more breakthroughs in expanding and deepening the meaning of Brand China, particularly with regard to soft power projections. With the unveiling of the BRI and the drive for internationalization of its higher education, the subsequent large scale enrolment of the B&R students provides China with such a chance.

Branding the nation is not propaganda. Chinese universities need to, among other things, provide first-rate EMI education to the B&R students, so that they can leave with meaningful, high-quality degrees and credentials, so they can make their own contribution to the home countries as well as the B&R construction. In this way, Chinese universities become, as Sataøen (2015) puts it, “part of such nation branding practices as they are used to promote the country for foreign students, employees and other stakeholders” [10]. There is still a long way to go.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The paper is financially supported by “Quality Program of Introduction to China’s Foreign Trade for International College Students in Jiangsu Province 2018 and China’s Ministry of

Education Grant of School-enterprise Cooperation to Training, NO. 201801222008”.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] S. Anholt, “Foreword to the Special Issue on Place Branding”, in *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 9, no. 4-5, 2002, pp.229-239.
- [2] V. H. Peter, “The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation”, in: *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 5, 2001, pp. 2-6.
- [3] S. Anholt, “Beyond the nation brand: The role of image and identity”, in *international relations. Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy*, vol. 2, Iss. 1, 2013, PP1-7.
- [4] OECD, *Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-en>, 2018
- [5] Y. Fan, “Branding the nation: What is being branded?”, in *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2006, pp. 5-14.
- [6] J. K. Park, Y. D. Kim, and K. DeMatteo, “Nation branding through internationalization of higher education: a case study of African students in South Korea,” in *The New Educational Review*, no. 45, 2016, pp.52-62.
- [7] Julie Dearden. English as a medium of instruction—a growing global phenomenon[EB/OL]. (2014-01-01)[2019-08-27]. [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/e484\\_emi\\_-\\_cover\\_option\\_3\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/e484_emi_-_cover_option_3_final_web.pdf).
- [8] T. Loo and G. Davies, “Branding China: The ultimate challenge in reputation management”, in *Corporate Reputation Review*, vol.9, no. 3, 2006, pp. 198-210.
- [9] W. Olins, “Branding the nation – the historical context”, in *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 9, no. 4-5, 2002, pp.241-248.
- [10] H. L. Sataøen, “Higher education as object for corporate and nation branding: Between equality and flagships”, in *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2015, pp.702–717.