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# Guest editorial: Internationalization of local universities: pathways to the development of a sustainable regional/local society in East Asia

Over the past three decades, the internationalization of higher education has been a central agenda in national higher education strategies worldwide. In East Asia, internationalization has largely been framed as a medium for modernization and global competitiveness, closely linked to participation in the global knowledge-based economy (Yang, 2016; Lo and Hou, 2020). The governments of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have invested in selective internationalization initiatives to cultivate world-class universities, enhance research visibility and attract and nurture global talent. Elite universities, which tend to be concentrated in major metropolitan areas, are the major beneficiaries of these competition-driven policies, while many local universities have been left behind global academic hierarchies (Lo and Hou, 2020).

Meanwhile, East Asian societies are undergoing profound structural transformations characterized by demographic contraction, rapid population aging and widening spatial disparities. As regional communities experience declining youth populations, labor shortages and economic stagnation, concerns over their sustainability have intensified. In response, regional revitalization has emerged as a major national policy agenda in South Korea in 2004, followed by Japan in 2014 and Taiwan in 2018 (Watabe *et al.*, 2026). Although the timing and intensity of metropolitan concentrations differ across these contexts, the sustainability of regional communities has become a shared structural challenge across East Asia.

Internationalization and regional revitalization have evolved as separate policy domains within higher education. National internationalization policies often emphasize global competitiveness, student mobility and institutional branding. In contrast, regional revitalization policies prioritize local economic renewal, industry development and demographic stabilization. However, regional revitalization initiatives increasingly expect local universities to function as gateways to global networks and resources for their surrounding communities (Watabe *et al.*, 2026). These parallel policy trajectories raise a critical question: How are local universities, particularly those that are located in non-metropolitan areas, reconciling these dual agendas under the conditions of demographic contraction and regional structural change?

This special issue argues that local universities are not merely peripheral actors within a stratified global higher education system; rather, they are emerging as regional anchor institutions linking internationalization with regional sustainability. It proposes that a sustainability-oriented paradigm of internationalization is emerging, distinct from the metropolitan, competition-driven model that prioritized global competitiveness, talent extraction and institutional prestige. The six contributions collected here suggest that a realignment between international engagement and regional sustainability is underway at the institutional level across Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, as local universities strategically reposition internationalization as a mechanism for community resilience and long-term socioeconomic sustainability.

The issue begins with a case study from Japan examining a culturally immersive, place-based short-term program for international researchers in Ise. Teh (2026) analyzes how this locally embedded, international initiative, developed through collaboration among a local university, the city government and community stakeholders, can contribute to regional sustainability. Rooted in the region's cultural and spiritual heritage, the program was initially designed to promote international tourism. However, the study illuminates that, beyond tourism objectives, it fostered a global network of international advocates for the region and



strengthened sociocultural sustainability. Furthermore, by cultivating renewed awareness of human-nature interconnections through immersive cultural experiences, the program suggests broader implications for environmental sustainability. The study demonstrates how culturally grounded, place-based internationalization can function as an instrument for reinforcing regional resilience.

In shifting from program-level innovation to institutional strategies, the second article analyzes two local private universities in South Korea. [Park and Tsukada \(2026\)](#) show that internationalization can serve as a strategic means for institutional capacity building, ultimately enabling universities to contribute more effectively to sustainable local development. Drawing on case studies, they identify four enabling factors that support the integration of internationalization and regional revitalization: aligning global engagement with local development priorities, context-based specialization, strategic and inclusive governance structures and a shared institutional mission and organizational culture. Their findings underscore the importance of organizational capacity and collegial governance in enabling regional universities to shape strategic pathways toward becoming anchor institutions within their regions.

The next two articles focus on Taiwan, where integrating global engagement into regional revitalization has been institutionalized through the University Social Responsibility (USR) initiative launched by Taiwan's Ministry of Education in 2018. The USR framework positions universities as place-based "think tanks" for regional development, encouraging them to address local challenges in collaboration with community stakeholders and international partners ([Hou et al., 2026](#)). In this context, global engagement is embedded in the broader agenda of sustainable local development.

[Hou et al. \(2026\)](#) identify four patterns of USR implementation: regional hub, market-driven, mission-oriented and community service-based, drawing on eight case studies of non-metropolitan universities receiving competitive USR funding. Their analysis reveals that aligning internationalization with USR objectives remains challenging for most non-metropolitan universities; only the regional hub type successfully integrates its USR initiatives within a global framework. Regional hub-type institutions demonstrated strong leadership in linking internationalization with USR strategies and their global research partnerships contributed to regional revitalization outcomes.

Complementing this broader typological analysis, [Liu and Noda \(2026\)](#) examine two USR-funded local universities with strong international orientations. Their analysis identifies two distinctive glocalization paradigms that adapt international strategies to local contexts. The first model positions the university as a specialized academic hub for regional collaboration and knowledge diplomacy. It integrates community-engaged education with international networks to foster international talent and empower local communities. The second model leverages international academic cooperation to address locally embedded challenges through technological and industrial innovation with applied learning. This study demonstrates how sustainability-oriented internationalization can be realized through differentiated glocal configurations that connect global knowledge flow with locally embedded challenges.

Expanding the scale of analysis, [Chiang et al. \(2026\)](#) focus on the Taiwan-Japan Alliance for regional revitalization and the practice of university social responsibility implemented under a USR initiative. The study examines how this transnational partnership platform for regional revitalization among 10 regional universities in two systems facilitates the internationalization of these universities. Their analysis reveals that a transnational alliance for regional revitalization can enable sustainability-oriented international engagement.

In the final article, [Watabe et al. \(2026\)](#) present a cross-country analysis of 18 local universities, six in each of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, examining how internationalization initiatives intersect with regional sustainability efforts. Crucially, the study finds that although social contribution and community engagement are not the first priority at the institutional policy level, an emergent pattern of practice is already repositioning internationalization as a

mechanism for regional resilience. The study identifies four types of regional sustainability-oriented internationalization initiatives: glocal human resource development, local talent retention through collaboration with local industries and organizations, local industry and value creation and expansion of related populations. Despite contextual differences across the three national and regional systems, the four identified types collectively indicate an emerging internationalization strategy oriented toward regional sustainability.

Collectively, the six contributions point toward an emerging sustainability-oriented paradigm of internationalization in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. These studies reveal that universities in East Asia are repositioning internationalization not as a quest for global prestige, but as a vehicle for regional revitalization and long-term sustainability. Each contribution, from different empirical and policy perspectives, illustrates how local universities are embedding international engagement within local development agendas aligned with demographic challenges, community-based partnerships, or sustainability-driven innovation strategies. For an international readership, this special issue offers new insights into how universities in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are redefining internationalization as a sustainability-oriented strategy that supports institutional resilience and regional revitalization amid demographic and structural challenges.

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