

International atmosphere impact on faculty engagement in internationalization: international attitudes mediation

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ABSTRACT

Globalization continues to reshape higher education, driving increased international exchanges and collaboration. This study investigates the impact of the international atmosphere on faculty engagement in internationalization (FEI), with a focus on local applied universities in China. Despite the recognized importance of faculty in facilitating internationalization efforts, limited research exists on their involvement. Utilizing surveys and structural equation modeling, data was collected from faculty members in local applied universities in China. The survey instrument covered demographics, perceptions of the international environment, engagement in international activities, and attitudes towards internationalization results indicate significant positive correlations between the international atmosphere, faculty international attitudes (FIA), and engagement in international activities. Specifically, the international atmosphere positively influences FIA and subsequent engagement in internationalization. Furthermore, FIA were found to partially mediate the relationship between the international atmosphere and engagement. This study contributes to the understanding of faculty involvement in internationalization efforts, addressing a gap in the literature. By identifying the factors influencing faculty engagement, institutions can develop targeted strategies to promote global engagement in higher education, ultimately enhancing the internationalization process.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization is an ongoing process that fosters increased international interaction and collaboration. The internationalization of higher education has emerged as a significant trend and a defining characteristic of educational progress. Many nations and educational establishments have adeptly executed strategies to capitalize on the opportunities and tackle the challenges presented by this internationalization. In the context of internationalization efforts, faculty members are recognized as indispensable participants and key contributors to the success of universities' internationalization initiatives [1]. The study posits that teachers, playing proactive and creative roles in the restructuring of the education system, have always been the drivers, leaders, and executors of internationalization [2], [3].

However, despite the essential role that faculty play in the process of internationalization, there is limited research on faculty involvement in internationalization. According to a survey conducted in the United States, faculty attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and engagement are found to be related to internationalization engagement [4]. Finkelstein and Sethi [5] investigated the predictors of faculty

engagement in internationalization (FEI) and found that personal and institutional factors largely explain the dependent variable. Moreover, there are notable differences in the characteristics and plans for internationalization among higher education institutions in different regions, leading to inconsistencies in teacher engagement [6], [7].

Especially in China, despite being the world's second-largest economy with a vast higher education system and the highest enrollment numbers, the development of the internationalization process is uneven across different types of higher education institutions [8], [9]. For "Double first-class" universities, internationalization is an important pathway to becoming world-class universities, whereas some local universities are almost invisible in terms of internationalization [10], [11]. Additionally, many newly established local applied colleges and universities are in a period of reform and development, and there is a significant limitation in relevant research findings and theoretical studies, which lack systematic and in-depth research [12].

This study, based on structuration theory, proposes a theoretical framework to explain how the international atmosphere influences FEI through their international attitudes, providing a new theoretical supplement to existing literature. Through empirical research, this paper reveals the specific mechanisms by which the international atmosphere, faculty international attitudes (FIA), and FEI interact, offering a new perspective for understanding teacher behavior. Finally, combined with the actual situation of higher education in China, the strategic recommendations put forward by this study are targeted and practical, providing innovative solutions for the internationalization practices of Chinese universities, especially local applied universities.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

A hypothetical model is constructed based on previous research and structuration theory. The model suggests that the university's international atmosphere and FIA have a positive impact on FEI. Furthermore, we hypothesized that FIA are the mediating factor between the international atmosphere of university and FEI. The hypothetical model is shown in Figure 1. Based on the hypothetical model, we conducted a questionnaire survey. By analyzing the questionnaires, we aimed to verify these hypotheses. This research employed path analysis to validate the mediating role of teachers' international attitudes in the relationship between the internationalization climate and the internationalization participation of teachers at local applied universities.

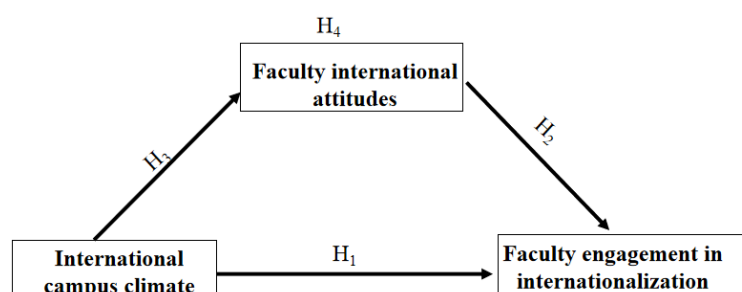


Figure 1. Research model diagram

2.2. Sample and data collection

The research subjects chosen for the study are four typical Chinese local applied undergraduate colleges and universities in Henan Province, all of which are representative of the exemplary applied technology undergraduate colleges and universities in Henan Province during the "14th five-year plan" period. In November 2023, the questionnaires were mainly distributed and collected electronically through the "Questionnaire Star" website platform. The website is a professional online questionnaire survey, evaluation and voting platform, which is easy to use. The questionnaires were distributed to the WeChat workgroups of each school, and interested teachers were invited to fill in the questionnaires. A total of 350 questionnaires were collected, with 350 valid questionnaires. The effective rate of questionnaires was 100%.

2.3. Research instruments

The research questionnaire for this study was a synthesis of questionnaires drawn from the development of several resources. The study used Schwietz's and Beatty's post-tested questionnaire on the Degree of Internationalization of University Teachers as the basic template [4], [13]. It also drew on and referred to the relevant revisions to the questionnaire made by Hang, and by drawing on these resources in an

integrated manner, the self-administered questionnaire of this study has the characteristics of being more comprehensive and applicable to fully understand teachers' perceptions and participation in the internationalization of the university [14].

The questionnaire mainly consists of four parts. The first part is the faculty personal information and academic background. This part mainly examines the gender, age, working experience, highest degree awarded (degree type, discipline), position type (teaching, scientific research), discipline type, professional title level and other items of the survey respondents. Research shows that faculty's motivations for internationalization also include certain characteristics related to the geographic region in which the institution is located, as well as characteristics that have a personal or cultural connection with the faculty [15]. The second part is about faculty cognition of the international development environment and related strategies of their universities. It mainly examines the university's support for internationalization in terms of strategic planning, funding, projects and various resources, which is the international atmosphere. The international atmosphere scale consists of three aspects, namely strategic planning, incentive support and internationalization importance evaluation, with a total of 10 items.

The third part is faculty engagement in international activities. The study uses a process-oriented definition of teacher internationalization based on Knight concept of internationalization [16]. Therefore, we define faculty internationalization as "the process of integrating international, intercultural, or global dimensions into faculty research, teaching, and service" [16]. Therefore, in this study, the international participation scale consists of three aspects: course teaching, student guidance, and scientific research exploration, with a total of 10 items. The fourth part is faculty perceived attitudes towards international activities on campus. International attitude consists of two aspects, namely international educational experience and global perspective cultivation, with a total of 10 items.

The research instrument is a 5-point Likert scale. The scale is scored: i) completely disagree; ii) relatively disagree; iii) neutral; iv) relatively agree; and v) completely agree. Higher score indicates the higher level of international participation, international atmosphere and international attitude. This study collected a total of 350 valid samples, examining the background variables of teachers at local applied universities in Henan Province, China, in terms of gender, age, years of teaching experience, highest academic degree, academic major, and title. The specific number of samples and their percentages are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic variables sample statistics (N=350)

| Background variable | Category | Sample size | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Gender | Female | 227 | 64.86 |
| | Male | 123 | 35.14 |
| Age | 25-30 | 24 | 6.86 |
| | 31-35 | 69 | 19.71 |
| | 36-40 | 71 | 20.29 |
| | 41-45 | 143 | 40.86 |
| | 46-50 | 21 | 6 |
| | Over 50 | 22 | 6.29 |
| Teaching experience | 1-5 years | 67 | 19.14 |
| | 6-10 years | 60 | 17.14 |
| | 11-15 years | 76 | 21.71 |
| | 16-20 years | 94 | 26.86 |
| | 21-25 years | 32 | 9.14 |
| | 25-30 years | 11 | 3.14 |
| | Over 30 years | 10 | 2.86 |
| Education | Bachelor | 33 | 9.43 |
| | Master | 231 | 66 |
| | Doctorate | 86 | 24.57 |
| Major | Engineering | 97 | 16.23 |
| | Other Natural Sciences | 74 | 21.14 |
| | Humanities and Social Sciences | 179 | 51.14 |
| Title | Instructor | 54 | 15.43 |
| | Lecturer | 188 | 53.71 |
| | Associate Professor | 93 | 26.57 |
| | Professor | 15 | 4.29 |

2.4. Analyzing of data

In this study, Cronbach's alpha is utilized to measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire and to assess the correlation between various sections of the questionnaire, with the results presented in Table 2. The calculations indicate that in all cases, the Cronbach's alpha values exceed 0.9, demonstrating a high level of internal consistency within the questionnaire, making it suitable for use in subsequent research.

The validity analysis results are shown in Tables 3 and 4. The higher loading coefficients of the three variables on the factors (all around 0.8) indicate that they are strongly correlated with the extracted factors. The commonality value of the variables is between 0.663 and 0.764, which means that the factors in the model can explain approximately 66.3% to 76.4% of the variable variance, which is a good indicator. Eigenvalues is 2.109, indicating that the extracted factors have relatively good explanatory power. As can be seen from Table 4, both AVE and AVE square root are higher than 0.5, which proves that the scale has good construct validity. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha are both higher than 0.7, which proves that the scale has better consistency. Based on the research hypothesis proposed in this study, the analysis of Pearson correlation coefficient shows that the correlation coefficient between international participation and international atmosphere is ($r=0.480$, $p<0.01$), indicating a significant positive correlation between international participation and international atmosphere; the correlation coefficient between international participation and international attitude is ($r=0.580$, $p<0.01$), indicating a significant positive correlation between international participation and international attitude; the correlation coefficient between international atmosphere and international attitude is ($r=0.601$, $p<0.01$), indicating a significant positive correlation between international atmosphere and international attitude, as shown in Table 4.

Table 2. Aspects, items and reliability tests of each subscale in the questionnaire

| Variable | Construct | Question | Cronbach's alpha | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|----------|------------------|-------|
| ICC | Strategic planning | 3 | 0.952 | 0.971 |
| | Incentive support | 4 | 0.966 | |
| FEI | International evaluation | 3 | 0.922 | 0.937 |
| | Course teaching | 4 | 0.923 | |
| | Student guidance | 2 | 0.933 | |
| FIA | Scientific research and exploration | 4 | 0.916 | 0.904 |
| | International education experience | 5 | 0.917 | |
| | Cultivating a global perspective | 5 | 0.900 | |

Table 3. Results of validity analysis

| Construct | Factor loading | Communality |
|---|----------------|-------------|
| FEI | 0.814 | 0.663 |
| FIA | 0.874 | 0.764 |
| ICC | 0.826 | 0.682 |
| Eigenvalues (pre-rotation) | 2.109 | - |
| Variance explained ratio (%) (pre-rotation) | 70.304% | - |
| Cumulative variance explained ratio (%) (pre-rotation) | 70.304% | - |
| Eigenvalues (post-rotation) | 2.109 | - |
| Variance explained ratio (%) (post-rotation) | 70.304% | - |
| Cumulative variance explained ratio (%) (post-rotation) | 70.304% | - |
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy | 0.690 | - |
| Bartlett's test of Sphericity | 312.651 | - |
| df | 3 | - |
| p | 0.000 | - |

Table 4. Inter-construct correlations, discriminant, convergent validity

| Variable | FEI | ICC | FIA |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|-------|
| FEI | 1 | | |
| ICC | 0.480** | 1 | |
| FIA | 0.580** | 0.601** | 1 |
| Mean | 2.978 | 3.730 | 3.962 |
| STD | 0.965 | 0.867 | 0.729 |
| AVE | 0.606 | 0.796 | 0.741 |
| (AVE square root) | 0.778 | 0.892 | 0.861 |
| Composite reliability | 0.821 | 0.885 | 0.894 |
| Cronbach's alpha | 0.937 | 0.971 | 0.904 |

Note : * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Descriptive analysis

This study employs path analysis to ascertain the causal relationships among variables. The relationships are typically quantified using standardized path coefficients. If the path coefficients reach a statistically significant level, it indicates a significant causal effect between the variables; if not, it suggests the absence of a detectable causal influence. The final path model derived from this study is visually represented in Figure 2.

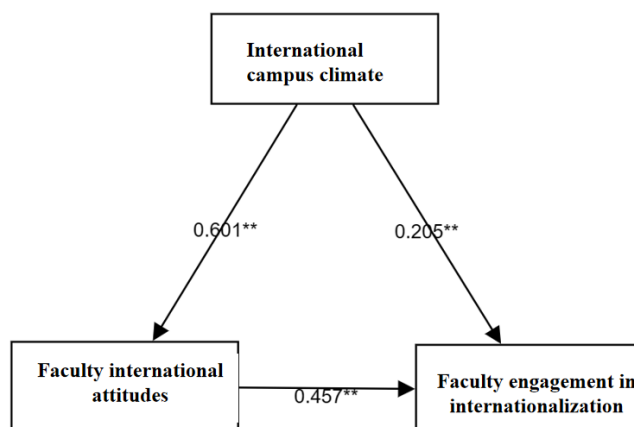


Figure 2. Model of FEI, international campus climate (ICC), and FIA

Table 5 offers the statistical analysis results of the relationships between variables across three distinct models. Specifically, it presents the regression coefficients from the independent variables (X) to the dependent variables (Y), which reflect the extent of the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variables. Each model within the table explores a particular hypothesis regarding how the independent variables affects the dependent variables.

The analysis of the results shows that when the international atmosphere affects FEI, the standardized path coefficient value is 0.205>0, and this path is significant at the 0.01 level ($z=3.833$, $p=0.000<0.01$), indicating that international atmosphere has a significant positive impact on international participation. When international attitude impacts international participation, the standardized path coefficient value is 0.457>0, and this path is significant at the 0.01 level ($z=8.562$, $p=0.000<0.01$), indicating that international attitude has a significant positive impact on international participation. When international atmosphere impacts international attitude, the standardized path coefficient value is 0.601>0, and this path is significant at the 0.01 level ($z=14.084$, $p=0.000<0.01$), indicating that international atmosphere has a significant positive impact on international attitude. Therefore, hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 are valid.

Table 5. Summary of regression coefficients of models

| X=>Y | Unstandardized path coefficient | SE | z (CR) | p | Standardized path coefficient |
|----------|---------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------------------------------|
| FIA=>FEI | 0.220 | 0.057 | 3.833 | 0.000 | 0.205 |
| ICC=>FEI | 0.605 | 0.071 | 8.562 | 0.000 | 0.457 |
| ICC=>FIA | 0.489 | 0.035 | 14.084 | 0.000 | 0.601 |

Note: =>indicates path influence relationships

3.2. Mediating role of faculty international attitudes

Bootstrapping is a method of estimating confidence intervals for indirect effects through repeated sampling. It can estimate the indirect effect and its confidence interval more accurately, and is especially suitable for small sample studies. It can more effectively control the errors in the testing process and is generally considered to be a more accurate and flexible method. It is also a commonly used method in modern testing of mediation effects [17]. Therefore, in order to test the authenticity of the mediating role of FIA between international atmosphere and FEI in local applied universities in China, this study further use bootstrapping method to test the mediating effect with 5,000 repeated samplings at a 95% confidence interval. The test results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Test table for the intermediary effect of the Bootstrapping method

| Path | Sign | Significance | Effect size | 95%CI | | z/t | p | Conclusion |
|---------------|------|-----------------|-------------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------------------|
| | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| ICC=>FIA=>FEI | a*b | Indirect effect | 0.296 | 0.206 | 0.342 | 8.545 | 0.000 | Partial mediation |
| ICC=>FIA | a | X=>M | 0.489 | 0.421 | 0.557 | 14.044 | 0.000 | |
| FIA=>FEI | b | M=>Y | 0.606 | 0.466 | 0.745 | 8.526 | 0.000 | |
| ICC=>FEI | c' | Direct effect | 0.220 | 0.107 | 0.334 | 3.817 | 0.000 | |
| ICC=>FEI | c | Total effect | 0.516 | 0.417 | 0.616 | 10.195 | 0.000 | |

Note: *P<0.05; ** P<0.01; ***P<0.001=>indicates path influence relationships

According to the calculation results, the lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence interval for indirect effects, direct effects, and total effects do not pass 0, and the Z-values are all greater than 1.96. The Z-value represents the size of the mediating effect relative to its standard error. Generally speaking, a Z-value greater than 1.96 (or the corresponding critical value for the selected significance level) indicates that the mediating effect is significant at that significance level. From the table, it can be seen that the Z-value of indirect effects is 8.545, which is greater than 1.96, indicating that the indirect effect of international atmosphere on international participation is significant. The Z-value of direct effects is 3.817, which is greater than 1.96, indicating that the direct effect of international atmosphere on international participation is significant. The Z-value of total effects is 10.195, which is greater than 1.96, indicating that the total effect of international atmosphere on international participation is significant. Therefore, it can be judged that international attitude plays a partial mediating role between internationalization and core competencies. Furthermore, research hypothesis H4 is verified, that is, the teachers' international cognitive awareness in local applied universities in China plays a partial mediating role between the perceived international atmosphere and international participation. After studying and analyzing the statistical data, the following research conclusions can be summarized based on the hypotheses of this study, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary table of results of hypothesis verification of this study

| Research hypothesis | Note |
|--|-------------|
| H1: The international attitude of teachers in local applied universities in China has a significant positive impact on FEI | Established |
| H2: The ICC of local applied universities in China has a significant positive impact on FEI. | Established |
| H3: The ICC of local applied universities in China has a significant positive impact on FIA. | Established |
| H4: The internationalization attitude of local applied universities in China plays a mediating role in the impact of the ICC on FEI. | Established |

3.3. Discussion

Based on the research hypotheses proposed in the study, statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) was used to explore the explanation and prediction relationships between variables; then a regression model was established with reference to the mediating effect and moderating effect testing methods proposed by Baron and Kenny to test the mediating role of FIA in the relationship between international atmosphere and FEI [18]. Research indicates that the universities' international atmosphere has a significant positive impact on FEI. According to Giddens [19] "structuration theory", which posits that both the constitution of individual agency and the formation of social structures are intricately linked to the interplay of social practices across time and space. The study asserts that teachers' understanding and concepts regarding the internationalization of higher education are subjective, yet clear and distinct. Their academic endeavors are capable of both constructing and transforming knowledge, enabling innovation and improvement. These actions are not only products of social structures, such as institutions and resources, but also play a role in altering or reproducing these structures [14].

The internationalization of universities fosters continuous self-organization and enhancement among faculty, encourages the absorption of new elements, and drives ongoing innovation, thereby advancing the sustained improvement and refinement of the university's internationalization efforts. Xu [14] believes that university managers should implement more direct strategic planning and incentive support through communication with faculty, and combine individual teachers' international participation with the overall strategic goals. Only by achieving collaboration and win-win between teachers and university internationalization strategies can the internationalization construction of universities be truly developed [14]. Facilitators of faculty internationalization are higher education institutions' commitment to internationalization, institutional leadership, organizational practices, recruitment practices, curricular internationalization opportunities, institutional partnerships, and personal and professional agendas [13].

The research conclusion of Childress points out that transparent internationalization strategies, increased financial and infrastructure support, institutional networks, and personal support promote the internationalization participation of teachers in American universities [20]. Knight [16] outlines several different ways in which institutional leaders can effectively communicate support for internationalization, including "explicit commitment from senior leaders," "expression of reason and purpose," and "recognition" of the international dimension in mission statements, planning, and policy documents. Knight [16] believes that rewarding teachers is an important strategy for strengthening internationalization. Stohl [1] believes that the reward structure, including compensation and tenure, is crucial for the importance of internationalization. Childress believes that administrative leaders encourage faculty members through policy and institutional structures by providing "critical infrastructure, incentives, and communication mechanisms to support faculty in developing an international dimension in teaching and research." Policymakers should first reach consensus on the understanding of internationalization, participation activities, and the role of stakeholders,

and then design, communicate, implement, monitor and reward key performance indicators at the national and institutional levels [21]. This process will help teachers understand the expectations and rewards of the institution [22].

Faculty international attitude has a significant positive impact on their international participation. FIA refer to their enthusiasm, interest, and confidence in internationalization activities; their understanding of the importance of internationalization for higher education institutions and/or personal development; their awareness and consciousness of internationalization (viewing it as an academic mission, not just a task); and their sense of professional vocation (viewing internationalization as part of a professional vocation, not just a job) [23]–[26]. Morris's study shows that there is a significant relationship between faculty's international experience, attitudes, engagement in internationalization, and faculty characteristics [27]. Schwietz [4] research has proven that faculty who hold a more favorable attitude towards internationalization are likely to engagement in internationalization to a higher degree. The research also demonstrates that teachers' international attitude in teaching and research is highly related to their international participation, while their international attitude in curriculum teaching is moderately related. A survey by the Association of International Universities shows that the international awareness and knowledge of teachers are listed as one of the main driving forces for university internationalization [7]. Research has also shown that personal willingness is an important factor in teacher development [28]. When teachers participate in international activities, they are more likely to prioritize personal or disciplinary motivations [25], [26]. The perceptions and beliefs of faculty members are crucial for understanding how they interpret internationalization [29]. The cognitive and belief of integrating international dimensions into teachers' work is the foundation of internationalization [26].

International atmosphere has a significant positive impact on teachers' attitudes towards internationalization. Navarro [30] argues that teachers' perceptions of internationalization are positively related to their participation in internationalization performances and their understanding of the internationalization strategy of the university. Teachers with a deeper understanding and knowledge of internationalization issues are more likely to be actively involved in internationalization activities and supportive of the universities' internationalization strategies. Research has shown that perceptions of campus culture and atmosphere affect teachers' interest in and support for internationalization [31]. The impact of the internationalization atmosphere on teachers' attitudes is reflected in two aspects. First, a positive internationalization environment encourages teachers to participate in international projects and integrate an international perspective into their teaching and research, thereby enhancing their awareness and skills in internationalization. Second, this atmosphere has a positive effect on teachers' professional growth and academic achievements, making them more inclined to engage in internationalization activities and form a positive attitude towards internationalization [14], [26].

FIA play a partial mediating role in the impact of international atmosphere on FEI. According to Klyberg [25], intrinsic motivation has a greater impact on teachers' internationalization than extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is associated with the pursuit of teacher autonomy, and this pursuit of autonomy can enhance the intrinsic motivation of learners [26]. According to Beatty [13], teachers' participation in internationalization efforts is heavily influenced by their perceived self-efficacy and favorable perceptions of the social environment. Additionally, the values and activities of teachers are strongly influenced by the culture of the campus [32]. Research by Li and Tu [26] have shown that personal and environmental motivations have a positive impact on teacher internationalization, with personal motivation serving as a mediator between environmental motivation and teacher internationalization. The study suggests that the international atmosphere stimulates teachers' intrinsic needs, such as a sense of reward and achievement. Personal motivation is the dominant factor affecting teachers' international participation, and transferring the influence of the international atmosphere to teachers' international participation. Faculty members believe that strong efficacy beliefs and positive perceptions of the organizational environment are crucial for faculty internationalization [33], [34]. Research results on Chinese universities show that both personal and environmental motivation are positively correlated to FEI, while personal motivation is a more critical predictor [26]. Personal motivation plays a complete mediating role between environmental motivation and FEI. Childress argues that widespread faculty support for internationalization is not endogenous at all, the faculty members require specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes as well as institutional support to effectively implement international programs [23]. Administrative support motivates FEI by fostering positive contextual beliefs [33], [34].

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of the international atmosphere in influencing FEI at local applied universities in China. It was evident that a positive international atmosphere

fosters faculty's international attitudes, subsequently enhancing their participation in international activities. Moreover, faculty's international attitudes were found to partially mediate the relationship between the international atmosphere and their engagement in internationalization efforts. These results contribute to filling the gap in the literature regarding faculty involvement in internationalization efforts, particularly in the context of local applied universities in China.

Moving forward, it is imperative for university administrators to recognize the pivotal role of fostering a conducive international atmosphere to promote FEI initiatives. Strategies aimed at enhancing the international atmosphere, such as transparent internationalization strategies, increased financial support, and institutional networks, should be prioritized. Additionally, efforts to cultivate positive international attitudes among faculty members through targeted interventions and support mechanisms are essential. By addressing these factors, universities can create an environment conducive to faculty participation in internationalization, thereby advancing their global engagement efforts and promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration.




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