The State of Knowledge in Social Self-efficacy among International Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

To examine the existing body of empirical research on social self-efficacy in international students, a systematic review of the peer-reviewed literature was conducted, with a focus on articles published between 2013 and 2024. Four inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the search process across the Scopus, ProQuest, PsycINFO, and ERIC databases. A total of ten studies met the inclusion criteria, with thematic synthesis revealing three themes: psychological adjustment, social interaction, and university support. We reflect on these themes concerning supporting the social self-efficacy of international students. Our findings underscore the need for future research in this area while initiating a conversation on how tertiary institutions can effectively support international students.

INTRODUCTION

International students play a crucial role in Australia, contributing significantly to its economic (Chowdhury, 2022; Levent, 2016) and cultural landscape (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019; Zhao & Harji, 2024). From an economic standpoint, international education is one of Australia's largest export sectors, generating billions of dollars annually and supporting full-time jobs across various sectors (e.g., education, hospitality, tourism, retail). Beyond economics, international students enrich Australia's cultural diversity by bringing unique values, perspectives, and beliefs that may foster inclusivity and global awareness. Such cultural exchanges promote social cohesion and can cultivate long-term international relationships. The number of international students has grown substantially (Agostinelli, 2021; Khamisu & Sonwaney, 2024; Hong et al, 2025), with international students comprising 803,639 of the study body in Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024), 758,855 of the study body in the United Kingdom (House of Commons Library, 2024), 1.1 million of the student body in the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2024) and 10.38% of the global student population in 2020 (OECD, 2024). Despite this, little is known about how to best support international students during their transition to studying overseas.

As such, understanding the psychosocial factors associated with students' psychological well-being has become a critical research priority (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Among these factors, social self-efficacy has garnered attention for its role in shaping students' adjustment (e.g., cross-cultural adjustment and sociocultural adaptation; Cao et al., 2023; Htet & Mohanan, 2022; Liu & Chen, 2022), well-being (e.g., mitigating social anxiety and reducing loneliness; Gazo et al., 2021; Aune et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2017) and transition to a new environment (Zhang & Ting, 2024). Indeed, a deeper understanding of social self-efficacy among international students may help inform the development of targeted interventions designed to enhance academic performance and social experiences.

This review examines the current state of knowledge regarding the social self-efficacy of international students, maps existing findings, highlights methodological or conceptual limitations, and proposes future research directions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study: What is the state of current knowledge about the social self-efficacy of international students, as assessed through the empirical peer-reviewed literature?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Social Self-Efficacy

Social self-efficacy refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they can establish and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships and handle social situations competently (Smith & Betz, 2000; Taylor et al., 2024). Like academic self-efficacy (i.e., one's confidence in one's ability to succeed in tasks; Khine & Nielsen, 2022; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2022) or emotional self-efficacy (i.e., one's confidence in one's ability to manage emotional responses; Won et al., 2024), social self-efficacy is context- and domain specific, relating to confidence in different areas of functioning (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Won et al., 2024). For example, an individual may hold high social self-efficacy at home when among their family but lower social self-efficacy when at university among their academic peers.

Importance of Social Self-Efficacy

Social self-efficacy influences students' ability to navigate interpersonal interactions and social challenges. Research has indicated that individuals with high social self-efficacy problem-solve and communicate effectively (Erozkan, 2013; Taylor et al., 2024; Zullig & Valois, 2019), engage comfortably in social relationships, and confront challenging circumstances (Deniz, 2021; Erozkan, 2013). As a result, they successfully build strong social connections and expect positive outcomes in future social interactions (Bakioglu & Turkum, 2017; Deniz, 2021). Conversely, individuals with low social self-efficacy may be concerned with perceived social rejection and avoid social engagements (Niu et al., 2023; Sanchez & Dunning, 2019), struggling to develop and refine their social skills, which can make future interactions even more challenging.

Social self-efficacy has been shown to impact students' mental health (Fu-Yuan et al., 2021; Gazo et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2024) by cultivating a strong sense of personal agency and increasing perceptions of control over one's life and surroundings (Bandura, 2001; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Studies have shown that strong social self-efficacy may help students mitigate mental health issues, such as loneliness (Brown-Smythe, 2023; Tsai et al., 2017), depression and acculturative stress (Kim et al., 2020), facilitating the development of resourceful and adaptive coping mechanisms that reduce vulnerability to mental health issues (Erozkan & Deniz, 2012; Fu-Yuan et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2024).

Relevance to International Students

The literature indicates the increased vulnerability of international students to stress (Chang, 2016; Koo et al., 2021) and adverse psychosocial well-being (Wang et al., 2021; Zhao & Harji, 2024; Xue & Singh, 2025), which may subsequently impact the likelihood of success (Wang et al., 2021; Zhao & Harji, 2024). This heightened vulnerability can be understood in light of the complex transition these

students face when moving overseas to study. Indeed, international students often struggle to adjust due to cultural and societal barriers (Akanwa et al., 2015), differences in social norms and academic expectations, or mismatched academic experiences (Taylor & Ali, 2017). Backman et al. (2025) and Rayn et al. (2016) further suggested that demographic factors (e.g., gender, age, and nation of origin) may be related to the mental health of international students.

Given these challenges, examining the internal factors that influence international students' ability to cope with and thrive in new environments is essential. Among these, social self-efficacy may be of particular importance to international students, as they attempt to adapt to other cultures (Chang, 2016; Wang et al., 2015), form networks (Çankaya et al., 2017), and achieve both academic and personal self-efficacy in a new country (Htet & Mohanan, 2022). However, little is known regarding how this construct may manifest in this population. As such, there is a need to review the literature to synthesize findings and identify directions for future research.

METHOD

To answer the research question and address the study aim, a systematic review of the published empirical literature related to the social self-efficacy of international students was conducted. The review followed the research synthesis stages outlined by Cooper et al. (2019) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (2020). The first step in the systematic review involved establishing inclusion/exclusion criteria to identify relevant studies. Studies were included on the basis of the following criteria:

- Published between 2013 and 2024
- Published in the English language
- Empirical studies in peer-reviewed journals
- Focusing on the social self-efficacy of international students

Each criterion guided the focus of this review. That is, the time period (i.e., 2013--2024) was selected to ensure that the review captured the most recent and relevant developments in the field. Additionally, this period coincided with a growing body of research on the mental health and psychological challenges faced by international students, with most studies published between 2013 and 2022 (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Empirical studies published in English were prioritized to maintain consistency in language and accessibility to international literature, whereas the publication was restricted to peer-reviewed literature and empirical studies to ensure rigor. Nonempirical articles, including reviews, opinion pieces, and theoretical papers, were excluded to maintain a focus on original research.

Search strategy

A systematic approach was employed across four academic databases (i.e., ProQuest, Scopus, PsycINFO, and ERIC). These databases were selected for their

extensive coverage of educational, psychological, and social sciences literature, making them ideal sources for studies related to international students and self-efficacy. The search terms used were chosen to ensure maximum relevance and inclusivity and included the following keywords: "social self-efficacy," "international students," "overseas students," "foreign students," and "abroad students." Boolean logic (i.e., 'AND' and 'OR') was used to refine and focus the search.
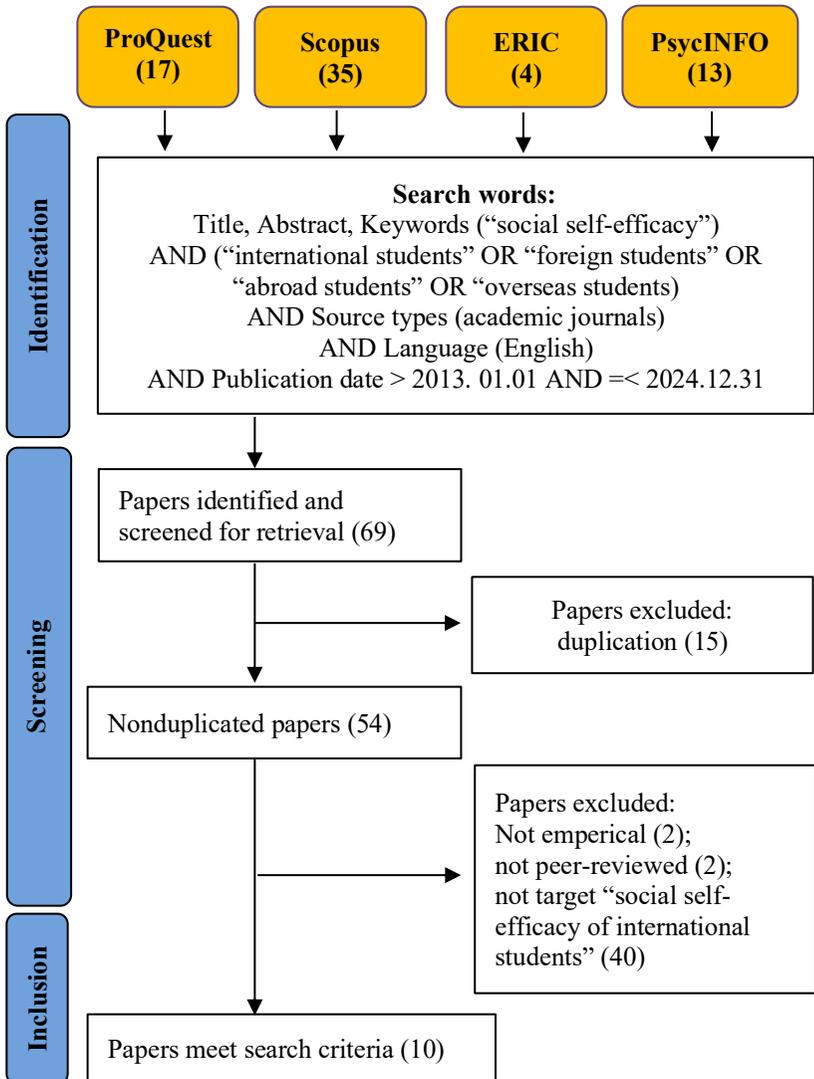

Figure 1: Selection and screening process

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to synthesize and interpret the data. This method helps organize, examine, and interpret the data patterns of meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2017) and provides a structured framework to address the research question (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). First, data analysis began with familiarization, which consisted of reading full articles multiple times to gain a deep understanding. Next, initial codes were generated through a flexible and reflective process involving reflective questions such as "What is being described in the data?", "How is it interpreted?", and "What is its significance?" (Tuckett, 2005; Jung et al., 2022). Following this, related codes were sorted and organized into broader patterns of meaning (i.e., potential themes) and evaluated to ensure that they were consistent within themselves and distinct from one another. Each theme was then clearly defined and named to capture its core meaning. Finally, the findings are reported with illustrative examples to present a well-structured interpretation of the results. Table 1 provides an overview of the emerging codes and themes.

Table 1: Emerging Codes and Themes

Themes	Codes
Psychological adjustment	stress, sojourner stress, acculturative stress, anxiety, negative thoughts, self-esteem, loneliness, belonging, well-being, distress, satisfaction
Social interaction	social connection, proactive personality, social situations, social isolation, interaction with locals, making friends, social relationships, communication skills, behavioral aspects of social functioning, sources of friendship
University support	consultation services, on-campus support resources, STAR program, ROPES intervention.

RESULTS

Ten studies were determined to meet the requirements for inclusion in the review (see Table 2). The majority of the studies included in this review were cross-sectional in nature and used quantitative methodologies that involved participant surveys (7 out of 10). Seven out of ten of these studies were conducted in the U.S. or Australia and focused on a range of international student populations, predominantly Chinese students. Methodologically, the reviewed studies predominantly employed quantitative research designs, with seven out of ten relying on self-report questionnaires to measure the construct of social self-efficacy. Among these, regression analysis was the most commonly used and was employed in four out of the ten studies.

Table 2

Summary of Included Papers

Article	Authors	Study design	Context	Sample	Social self-efficacy measure	Findings
WeChat Use and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students in China: The Mediating Role of Social Self-Efficacy	Zhang and Ting (2024)	Cross-sectional design Quantitative research method	Chinese higher education	215 international students	The Scale of Perceived Social Self-efficacy (PSSE; Smith & Betz, 2000)	WeChat use and cross-cultural adaptation was partially mediated by social self-efficacy.
A social cognitive model predicting international students' cross-cultural adjustment in China.	Cao et al. (2023)	Cross-sectional design Quantitative research method	Chinese higher education	789 international students	Social Self-Efficacy subscale from the Self-Efficacy Scale (SSE; Sherer et al., 1982)	Social self-efficacy was directly or indirectly associated with psychosocial adjustment and host culture adoption.
The Moderating Effect of Perceived Social Self-Efficacy and Perceived Social Support on the Relationship between Acculturative Stress and Socio-Cultural Adaptation Among Myanmar Students in Thai Universities	Htet and Mohanan (2022)	Cross-sectional design Quantitative research method	Thai higher education	120 Myanmar international students	PSSE (Smith & Betz, 2000)	Social self-efficacy moderated the link between acculturative stress and sociocultural adaptation.

Title	Author	Design/Method	Context	Sample	Measure	Findings
An examination of the relationship between social self-efficacy and personal growth initiative in international context	Çankaya et al. (2017)	Cross-sectional design Quantitative research method	US higher education	188 international graduate students	PSSE (Smith & Betz, 2000)	The ability to navigate social situations and foster positive interactions predicts greater personal growth initiative.
Reciprocal relations between social self-efficacy and loneliness among Chinese international students	Tsai et al. (2017)	Cross-sectional design Quantitative research method	US higher education	409 Chinese international students	SSE (Sherer et al., 1982)	Reciprocal relationships between social self-efficacy and loneliness were evident at all three time points.
Belonging on campus: A qualitative inquiry of Asian international students	Slaten et al. (2016)	Cross-sectional design Qualitative method	US higher education	11 international students	Interview	Belonging spans various psychosocial contexts, including intrapersonal factors like social self-efficacy.
Beyond Host Language Proficiency: Coping Resources Predicting International Students' Satisfaction	Mak et al. (2015)	Cross-sectional design Quantitative research method	Australian higher education	385 Asian-born international students	12-item scales (Neil & Mark's, 2007)	Intercultural social self-efficacy predicted personal satisfaction.
Social Factors in Cross-National Adjustment: Subjective Well-Being Trajectories Among Chinese International Students	Wang et al. (2015)	Four-wave longitudinal study Quantitative research method	US higher education	411 Chinese international students	SSE (Sherer et al., 1982)	Social factors (social self-efficacy) predict Subjective Well-Being Trajectories.

Title	Author (year)	Method	Context	Sample	Instrument	Findings
A group psychological intervention to enhance the coping and acculturation of international students	Smith and Khawaja (2014)	Mix-methods Experimental design	Australian higher education	16 international students	20 item scales (Fan & Mak, 1998)	The STAR (Strengths, Transitions, Adjustments, and Resilience) intervention led to increases in social self-efficacy.
Pretraining perceived social self-efficacy accentuates the effects of a cross-cultural coping orientation program: Evidence from a longitudinal field experiment	Fan and Lai (2014)	Quantitative method Experimental design	US higher education	72 newly arrived East Asia international students	PSSE (Smith & Betz, 2000)	The ROPES (Realistic Orientation Program for Entry Stress) intervention is more effective for sojourners with high social self-efficacy. Social self-efficacy was a significant predictor of self-reported sojourner stress and adjustment.

FINDINGS

Findings

From 2014--2017, a small but steady amount of research was published, with two articles published in 2014, two in 2015, one in 2016, and two in 2017, indicating a growing interest in the topic. There was a notable gap between 2018 and 2021, during which no publications concerning social self-efficacy among international students were recorded, suggesting a temporary decline in research attention. Nevertheless, the years 2022--2024 marked a resurgence, with one article published each year. This renewed output reflected renewed academic engagement and emerging trends in the field.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analyses revealed three themes: (1) psychological adjustment, (2) social interaction, and (3) university support.

Theme 1: Psychological adjustment

Psychological adjustment refers to the mental changes experienced by international students during the acculturation process (Bender et al., 2019; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) and can be defined as positive (e.g., well-being) or negative (e.g., mental health challenges). Positive psychological adjustment is important for international students, as it is linked to increased life satisfaction and wellness (Arslan et al., 2022; Koo et al., 2021). In contrast, negative psychological adjustment often includes challenges, such as acculturative stress (Bender et al., 2019; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994) or psychiatric symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression; Sümer et al., 2008).

Seven papers emphasized the role of social self-efficacy in supporting international students' psychological adjustment. Slaten et al. (2016) highlighted that social self-efficacy mitigated acculturative stress in international students, promoting a sense of university belonging and expediting the process of psychological adjustment. Similarly, social self-efficacy predicts reduced cultural shock (Wang et al., 2015), acculturative stress (e.g., sojourner stress; Cao et al., 2023; Fan & Lai, 2014; Htet & Mohanan, 2021), and positive self-esteem (Zhang & Ting, 2024). Moreover, prearrival social self-efficacy could significantly influence adaptation to the host culture. Tsai et al. (2017) reported that social abilities developed in students' home countries often transfer to new cultural contexts, potentially reducing feelings of loneliness, which is an important factor in predicting psychological adjustment (Wang et al., 2018).

Theme 2: Social interaction

The role of social self-efficacy in overcoming challenges to social interaction faced by international students emerged across seven studies. Specifically, Htet and Mohanan (2021) and Cao et al. (2023) reported that social self-efficacy aided international students in navigating new sociocultural changes, enhancing their social performance. Smith and Khawaja (2014) suggested that the strengths, transitions, adjustments, and resilience program (STAR) built cognitive strategies, such as social self-efficacy, that helped international students address negative attitudes toward social interactions.

In particular, socially self-efficacious international students, such as academic staff, domestic students, or community members, are more willing to start conversations and engage with locals (Cao et al., 2023; Slaten et al., 2016; Zhang & Ting, 2024). For example, Chinese international students with higher social self-efficacy tended to have more American friends during their first two terms in the United States (Tsai et al., 2017). Moreover, according to Tsai et al. (2017), social self-efficacy extends beyond specific cultural or national contexts, allowing individuals to engage in social interactions effectively in various environments. In contrast, students exhibiting poor social self-efficacy perceive themselves as timid and often avoid group conversations and social engagements, resulting in difficulties in forming friendships and engaging in collaborative initiatives (Slaten et al., 2016).

Theme 3: University support

Another common theme was the interplay between university support and social self-efficacy among international students. Specifically, five studies highlighted this reciprocal relationship. Zhang and Ting (2024) suggested that international students with strong self-efficacy are satisfied with the support provided by their university. In turn, university support can enhance international students' social self-efficacy (Çankaya et al., 2017; Cao et al., 2023; Fan & Lai, 2014; Smith & Khawaja, 2014). Furthermore, social self-efficacy was found to interact with university support in fostering students' outcomes (e.g., host culture adoption and academic adjustment; Cao et al., 2023). When students feel confident in their social skills and receive strong institutional support, they are more likely to embrace the host culture and meet academic expectations.

University support could be provided through emotional assistance (e.g., counseling systems) and instrumental assistance (e.g., training programs; Cao et al., 2023). Smith and Khawaja (2014) suggested that universities could implement the STAR program to strengthen international students' social self-efficacy, helping them adapt to their new environment. Similarly, Fan and Lai (2014) confirmed that higher social self-efficacy improves cross-cultural adjustment, with interventions such as the Realistic Orientation Program for Entry Stress (ROPES) further strengthening these effects. Moreover, they added that universities should develop or implement effective cross-cultural training programs for international students with varying levels of social self-efficacy. Additionally, Çankaya et al. (2017)

interpreted their findings on social self-efficacy and the Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) as evidence of the need to enhance effective integration practices to support the cross-cultural adjustment of international students. They suggested increasing social support resources on campuses and offering social skills training.

DISCUSSION

The publication pattern over the past decade revealed important trends and gaps in research on social self-efficacy among international students. Early studies from 2014–2017 revealed an emerging interest in social self-efficacy, which aligned with increased global student mobility during this period. Specifically, the number of international students in OECD countries increased by more than 30% during this time (OECD, 2025). The absence of studies from 2018–2021 could be attributed to research disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited international student mobility and shifted the academic focus to other topics (e.g., online learning; Yıldırım et al., 2021). Finally, the steady, although limited, number of studies from 2022--2024 has suggested a recovery, possibly driven by renewed attention to the psychological and social adjustment of international students postpandemic (Oduwaye et al., 2023). However, the overall volume of studies (10 over 11 years) was low, indicating that social self-efficacy among international students remains underexplored. In addition, the lack of studies in 2013 and 2018–2021 highlights significant gaps, particularly in understanding how social self-efficacy evolved during periods of global change.

Findings from the thematic analysis confirmed the role of social self-efficacy in supporting the mental health of international students. In particular, it helps mitigate negative psychological problems (e.g., acculturative stress and loneliness; Slaten et al., 2016; Tsai et al., 2017) and predicts positive psychological states (e.g., reduced cultural shock and improved self-esteem; Wang et al., 2015; Zhang & Ting, 2024). These findings from the international student sample were consistent with those of previous research (e.g., Fu-Yuan et al., 2021; Gazo et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2024), highlighting the positive influence of social self-efficacy on students' psychological well-being. Additionally, including an international student sample broadens the understanding of social self-efficacy's impact on cultivating students' mental health across diverse student groups, and although this relationship is complex, other factors (e.g., length of stay, personality traits; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Shu et al., 2017) may contribute to students' psychological adjustment, indicating that social self-efficacy warrants further exploration in the international study population.

Additionally, the results of this review highlight the significant role of social self-efficacy in shaping the social experiences of international students. These findings emphasize the importance of social self-efficacy in supporting international students in handling distinct perceived challenges, such as engaging with locals or domestic students (Cao et al., 2023; Slaten et al., 2016; Zhang & Ting, 2024). By examining the role of social self-efficacy in the setting of international students, this review contributes to the body of literature on social interaction and social self-efficacy. Additionally, these findings support Bandura's self-efficacy

theory, which suggests that individuals with strong self-beliefs are more likely to take initiative and persevere in challenging situations (e.g., Slaten et al., 2016). For international students, social self-efficacy serves as a crucial psychological resource for navigating unfamiliar cultural and social environments. However, cultural differences profoundly influence social interactions among students by shaping communication styles, social behavior, and social skills (Azmi et al., 2023; Koc & Turan, 2018). For example, Park & Kim (2008) suggested that Asian American students demonstrated emotional regulation and less expressive communication methods, whereas European American students exhibited direct communication and inferential meaning patterns. Therefore, to further understand how cultural elements influence the interplay between social self-efficacy and social connection, future research may employ Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions framework.

These findings highlight the interplay between university support and social self-efficacy. Findings on psychological interventions (e.g., ROPES and STAR) demonstrated positive effectiveness in enhancing students' social self-efficacy. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2022) and Vella-Brodrick et al. (2020) reported that interventions in school settings created opportunities for student agency, voice, and engagement while actively involving all school community members. Furthermore, interventions such as orientation programs, peer mentorship, and life skills workshops that integrate social self-efficacy components could promote perspective-taking, transfer efficacy beliefs to mentees, and foster vicarious experiences of handling difficulties (Holt & Fifer, 2018; Mozley et al., 2020; Varghese & Finkelstein, 2021). These programs help address individual needs in educational settings, especially for students with lower initial social self-efficacy.

However, it would be worth investigating whether the effects persisted beyond the conclusion of the intervention (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020, 2022). According to Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020), when an intervention promotes self-efficacy, further research is necessary to identify the personal, environmental, and behavioral factors that contribute to its maintenance and transfer. Additionally, it is important to investigate how the visibility and effective communication of university support influence international students' perceptions of accessible assistance. This perception may significantly influence their psychological adjustment and overall well-being rather than the actual existence of support services (Bender et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2023). Moreover, previous studies have suggested that digital interventions can increase individuals' social self-efficacy across fields (e.g., healthcare and education; Sanchez et al., 2017; Rogala et al., 2020), complementing traditional support services. Future studies should investigate how these digital tools can be integrated with traditional forms of support to provide additional help to students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Some limitations should be noted in this review. First, much existing research has been regionally focused, particularly on international students in Western educational contexts, raising questions about the generalizability of the findings to other cultural settings. Although self-efficacy is generally regarded as a universal

concept applicable across various contexts, its interpretation could vary considerably on the basis of contextual and cultural factors (Khine & Nielsen, 2022; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Usher & Schunk, 2017). Furthermore, a significant portion of the studies categorized all international students into one homogeneous group, ignoring the variation among international students and their experiences (Liu & Chen, 2022; Rujiprak, 2016; Townsend & Poh, 2008). Future studies may consider heterogeneity within the international student population regarding social self-efficacy to address this issue.

A further limitation was the cross-sectional design in most studies, making it unsuitable for determining the causal direction of the observed effects (Khine & Nielsen, 2022). Finally, social self-efficacy instruments are self-report surveys, which might introduce bias in responses (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, & Creswell, 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In addition, likert-type responses limit students' opportunities to clarify or expand their answers (Creswell, & Creswell, 2017; Khine & Nielsen, 2022; Wolters & Won, 2017). Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to explore causal relationships over time and incorporating mixed methods approaches to gain deeper insights into students' perspectives and experiences.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review highlights the pivotal role of social self-efficacy in promoting the mental health of international students, underscoring its connection to both positive and negative psychological adjustment. Importantly, university support, including targeted interventions such as STAR and ROPES, was essential in enhancing social self-efficacy by equipping students with the necessary social skills. However, the review identified significant methodological and contextual gaps, including a focus on Western contexts and predominantly cross-sectional designs, which limits the generalizability and causal interpretations of the findings. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and culturally diverse approaches to better capture the nuanced nature of social self-efficacy across various educational contexts and cultural backgrounds.

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