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Emerging Trends and Challenges in International Student Research: A Content Analysis of Recent Dissertations (2022–2024)

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ABSTRACT: *This study presents a content analysis of 470 doctoral dissertations published between 2022 and 2024, examining emerging trends, theoretical frameworks, and research approaches related to international students. Using a qualitative content analysis approach and descriptive statistics, the study systematically analyzed the dissertations to identify recurring themes and issues. The key themes identified include teaching and learning; academic practices; acculturation and intercultural competence; career development and leadership; experiences and challenges; mobility and policy contexts; social diversity and inclusion; institutional support; and well-being. The findings show a predominant use of qualitative methods, a concentration on U.S.-based contexts, and a strong disciplinary focus on higher education. Gaps include insufficient attention to digital and online education, underrepresentation of non-Western regions, and insufficient theoretical grounding. The study underscores the need for more inclusive, interdisciplinary, and methodologically diverse research to inform policies and practices that support international students' academic success, well-being, and global mobility in an evolving educational landscape.*

Keywords: content analysis, dissertations, higher education, international students, review, trends

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INTRODUCTION

The global movement of international students has become a stark feature across different levels of contemporary education, reflecting the interconnectedness of economies, cultures, and knowledge systems (Barnett et al., 2015; OECD, 2021). With millions of students crossing borders each year to pursue academic opportunities, international education has been a critical driver of economic growth, cultural exchange, and innovation (UNESCO, 2023). For host institutions, international students contribute to diversity and enrich the academic environment through their varied perspectives and experiences. However, these students also face unique challenges, including cultural adjustment, social integration, academic expectations, and structural barriers, which counteract their overall success and well-being.

Studying international students is impactful and valuable. It provides a path for researchers, educators, and policymakers to understand the factors shaping their academic and social experiences, securing insights into how their experiences vary across geographic, cultural, and institutional contexts. Moreover, as higher education systems continue to prioritize internationalization, probing the experiences of international students is critical to fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. In addition, understanding the complexities of international student mobility informs policies that address global inequities and create equitable opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds (Maringe & Foskett, 2013).

In the past decade, across different levels of education, particularly higher education, research has examined the multifaceted experiences of international students. These studies are not only shaped by rapidly evolving global dynamics but also influenced by significant disruptions, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, regional conflicts, immigration policies, political dynamics, and intensified focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion within academic institutions (de Wit & Altbach, 2022; Doucet et al., 2020). As the

number of international students continues to increase globally, understanding the key trends and issues in their academic and social experiences has become a pressing concern for stakeholders.

Dissertations represent a rich repository of current research, providing detailed explorations of emerging topics, methodologies, and perspectives. They often reflect academic priorities and societal concerns, making them valuable resources for identifying trends and challenges within specific fields (Shapiro Library, 2023). In particular, recent dissertations reflect the latest developments in international student research, offering a timely snapshot of the field's evolving priorities, methodologies, and challenges, such as the post-COVID-19 pandemic era's impact on student mobility, the consequences of geopolitical conflicts for international students, mental health, and the new trend in immigration policies in host countries (e.g., Oluwatobi, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The global mobility of students has become a defining feature of international education, with the number of students studying abroad steadily rising to over six million (UNESCO, 2023). International student flows are reshaping university demographics, influencing institutional policies, and fostering global partnerships (OECD, 2021), highlighting international education's role in global talent development and intercultural dialog.

For this study, an international student is defined as someone crossing national borders for postsecondary education on a temporary visa or permit (OECD, 2021), including both degree-seeking and short-term program participants. Despite a slight decrease during the COVID-19 pandemic, international student numbers at the university level have rebounded, particularly in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. India has surpassed China as the leading country of origin for international students in many destinations (IIE, 2024). For example, U.S. enrollment increased by 10.4% in 2023, reaching over 1.5 million students, with Indian students comprising the largest share (377,620) (Boundless Immigration, 2024). In addition to tertiary education, international student mobility is increasingly evident at the secondary level, particularly in English-speaking countries, as students pursue high school education abroad to increase their readiness for university studies (Timilsina & Bhurtel, 2024).

Key Research Issues in Past Studies

Prior research on international students consistently highlights several important issues, including language barriers, academic adaptation, social integration, and mental health concerns. For example, studies have shown that nonnative English speakers often face multifaceted disadvantages in terms of academic performance and publication opportunities (Kaur & Newell, 2024; Lenharo, 2023). Use of the writing center and academic support strategies has been linked to improved outcomes (Chibani, 2014).

In addition to academics, social and cultural integration remains a significant issue. International students experience isolation, which can lead to loneliness; peer mentoring and cultural exchange programs are identified as potential solutions. Transitioning into independence while adjusting to cultural differences can cause significant stress (Muganga et al., 2025). Similar issues are visible at the K-12 level, where younger students face acculturation challenges, with parental support and school inclusivity playing critical roles in their adaptation (Elias et al., 1997). More recent studies have focused on evolving pressures, such as COVID-19 disruptions (Lee et al., 2024) and mental health stressors (Zhang et al., 2024), exacerbated by visa issues, academic pressure, and financial difficulties (Fazel et al., 2020; Hwang et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2018). The intersection of immigration policies, inclusion in the host country, and economic factors also significantly impacts student mobility and universities' strategies (Brown & Jones, 2013; Zhang & Shapiro, 2019).

Equity and inclusion research critiques disparities faced by international students relative to domestic peers, including discrimination and exploitation in housing and employment, and calls for inclusive institutional policies and practices (Buckner et al., 2022; Sotomayor et al., 2022). Bias and xenophobia remain barriers to full integration, often discouraging international students from forming connections with local communities (Brown & Jones, 2013).

Global Mobility and Geopolitical Contexts

While much research highlights individual-level challenges faced by international students, broader systemic and geopolitical factors also profoundly shape the patterns of student mobility and their lived experiences. Global mobility remains a central focus in international student research and is shaped by immigration policies, geopolitical dynamics, and institutional recruitment strategies. Restrictive visa policies and uncertain poststudy work options in countries such as the U.S. and U.K. deter enrollment, whereas more welcoming environments in Canada and Australia increase student numbers (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Geopolitical crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and diplomatic tensions, further disrupt mobility patterns and increase students' vulnerabilities. In response, institutions are diversifying their recruitment efforts toward South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, although competition remains fierce and raises concerns about ethical practices and support systems. Rising tuition costs, financial burdens, and compliance pressures on universities (e.g., visa monitoring) also influence the landscape, underscoring the need for coordinated policies that protect students' rights while promoting sustainable global mobility (Choudaha & de Wit, 2019).

Although prior research has generated substantial insights, several gaps remain underexamined. Much of the literature continues to frame international students through deficit-oriented perspectives that emphasize adaptation problems rather than structural or institutional factors (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). Research is also heavily concentrated in Western host countries, producing geographically narrow evidence base and overlooking underrepresented regions

(Marginson, 2018). These limitations underscore the need to examine recent doctoral research to capture emerging trends, shifts in theoretical framing, and areas where conceptual and empirical blind spots persist.

Doctoral dissertations serve as a vital source of knowledge in this evolving area. As comprehensive and often theory-informed studies, dissertations capture emerging trends, underexplored topics, and diverse methodological approaches within international student research. They also offer original contributions that reflect institutional contexts, global developments, and the shifting priorities of international education. As noted in doctoral education research, dissertations frequently introduce new theoretical perspectives and underexplored topics that later shaped mainstream scholarship (Pyhältö et al., 2009). Therefore, reviewing recent dissertations offers a unique opportunity to synthesize current knowledge and chart future directions in the field.

The current study seeks to synthesize and analyze the major themes and trends emerging in doctoral dissertation research on international students enrolled in different levels of educational institutions from 2022–2024. Examining titles, abstracts, keywords, and classification (disciplines) of dissertations published within this timeframe aims to address two central research questions:

1. What major trends characterize doctoral dissertation research topics and themes related to international students between 2022–2024?
2. How are methodological approaches, geographic contexts, and disciplinary orientations represented across these dissertations?

METHOD

This study employs a content analysis approach, a qualitative research method that systematically examines textual data, such as abstracts and titles, to identify patterns, trends, and themes. Content analysis is particularly effective for uncovering emerging issues in a specific field and organizing data into meaningful categories, making it well suited for analyzing recent dissertations focused on international students (Krippendorff, 2018). It allows researchers to combine both qualitative and quantitative elements, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the data (Neuendorf, 2017).

Data Collection

The dataset for this study includes doctoral dissertation titles and abstracts published between 2022 and 2024 (see Appendix). This timeframe was selected to capture the most recent trends and emerging research priorities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that significantly reshaped international student mobility, policy, and experiences. These dissertations were sourced from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, one of the most comprehensive repositories for academic research. To identify relevant doctoral dissertations, specific search terms, including "international students," "student mobility,"

"study abroad," "internationalization," and "ESL," were combined with Boolean operators to refine the search results. These terms were used because they capture relevant studies that focus on international students. Filters for publication date (2022–2024) and document type (dissertations) ensure the selection of recent doctoral research. Additional institutional repositories were consulted to ensure broader geographic and thematic coverage.

This systematic search resulted in the final selection of 470 dissertations, which represent a diverse range of research themes, methodologies, geographic contexts, and researchers' disciplinary orientations. Dissertations span fields such as education, sociology, business, public policy, health sciences, and interdisciplinary studies, reflecting the broad spectrum of academic classifications among students investigating international student issues.

Analysis

The study employs an inductive approach to coding, where themes are derived directly from the data, allowing for a flexible and open exploration of emerging patterns in the dissertations. No predefined set of themes was established prior to the analysis. This approach allowed the researchers to remain open to unexpected findings and explore new or underexamined areas within the data. One author initially conducted the coding and developed a preliminary codebook, which was then applied across the entire dataset. To ensure consistency and enhance the reliability of the coding process, the coauthors independently reviewed a subset of the coded abstracts. Their feedback led to iterative refinements of the codebook before the full analysis was conducted. Although interrater reliability statistics were not calculated, consistency checks were carried out through collaborative review sessions in which discrepancies were discussed and resolved. This peer feedback process helps ensure the relevance, clarity, and consistency of the codes. Throughout the process, coding logs were maintained to document analytic decisions, and an audit trail provided transparency in how themes were developed. Thematic saturation was monitored during coding, and peer debriefing among the authors helped ensure accuracy and minimize potential coder bias.

The dissertations were analyzed for their research methodologies, geographic distributions, theoretical frameworks, and thematically categorized topics. The coding process involved three stages: initial coding to identify recurring ideas at the abstract level, clustering codes into thematic categories, and descriptive analysis to quantify the prevalence of themes across the dataset.

FINDINGS

The demographic analysis of the dissertations examined reveals significant trends in research on international students, encompassing diverse research themes, methodologies, and geographic contexts. The majority of dissertations were published in 2022 (N=191; 40.6%) and 2023 (N=181; 38.5%), with a decline in 2024 (N=98; 20.8%). The increase in 2022–2023 may reflect post-pandemic

research momentum, whereas the decline in 2024 could be due to delays in dissertation completion or data reporting.

Main Topics

In screening the broad range of dissertations related to international students in higher education, we identified eight broad themes that branch out into a number of subthemes:

· Teaching, learning, and academic practices
· Acculturation and intercultural competence
· Career development and leadership
· Experiences and challenges
· Mobility and policy contexts
· Social diversity and inclusion
· Institutional support
· Wellbeing

Teaching, learning, and academic practices remain prominent in dissertations, with 87 of the 470 dissertations. Subthemes in this category include academic supervision (Daraz, 2023; Schell, 2024; Thibault, 2022), language learning (Abdalhadi, 2023; Alqahtani, 2023; Cypriano, 2024; Hashim, 2024; Raack, 2024; Zhao, 2023), writing (Nesfield, 2023; Jabeen, 2023; Liang, 2022), and educational technology (Chen, 2024; Johnson, 2022).

Studies on academic supervision have emphasized the importance of providing culturally responsive, developmentally informed advice. Daraz (2023) reported that international undergraduates were more satisfied when advisors tailored guidance to individual needs and demonstrated curricular expertise. Language learning was frequently linked to participation and academic confidence. Raack (2024) and Hashim (2024) examined how students accessed language support and navigated academic expectations, whereas studies by Cypriano (2024) and Zhao (2023) explored the benefits and limitations of mobile language tools, particularly with respect to access and effectiveness. Writing practices demonstrate the need for targeted academic support, as students navigate issues of self-efficacy, academic integrity, and access to resources. Liang (2022) reported that, although a growth mindset was associated with stronger writing self-efficacy, its benefits were moderated by students' perceived writing competence. Technology continues to transform learning environments, with tools such as VR, gamification, and social media. However, dissertations reveal mixed outcomes. For example, Johnson (2022) noted that while gamified and collaborative learning platforms offered potential, online fatigue and limited social interaction often reduced their effectiveness.

The themes of ***acculturation and intercultural competence*** show complex patterns in international students' acculturation experiences. Sixty-seven dissertations explored this theme, covering major subthemes such as acculturation (Kadir, 2024; Kim, 2024; Wuysang, 2022), acculturative stress (DeSilva, 2022; McFerren, 2023; Valuyeetham, 2022), adaptation (Adu-Wusu, 2024; Mehta,

2023; Screws, 2022), adjustment (Adenuga, 2022; Huang, 2023; Qureshi, 2024), integration (Li, 2024; Thompson, 2023), and intercultural competence (Robert, 2023; Zhou, 2022).

Several studies have examined the psychological aspects of acculturation. Kadir (2024) and Kim (2024) reported that mindfulness-based practices help reduce stress and foster adaptability, suggesting the value of culturally responsive wellness programs. McFerren (2023) identified practical barriers in housing, food access, and navigating campus resources, with international students reporting more difficulty than their domestic peers did, especially in admissions processes. Intercultural competence research has highlighted the importance of faculty cultural awareness. Robert (2023) noted that mismatched expectations and epistemologies created confusion, highlighting the need for faculty training. Overall, the studies suggest that social interactions, community engagement, and structured support programs aid adaptation, whereas intercultural competence develops through faculty cultural intelligence, global curricula, and interactive activities. The dissertations indicate an evolution in understanding intercultural competence, moving beyond simple cultural adjustment to examine how factors such as prior experiences, family background, and institutional structures interact to shape students' global competencies.

Career development and leadership constitute a small number of dissertations; 23 address international students' preparedness for employability and leadership within academic and professional settings. The key subthemes include career development (Liu, 2023; Kopperud, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Zhu, 2024) and leadership (Amu, 2024; Hu, 2022; Roberts, 2023). Liu (2023) examined how international undergraduate students in the U.S. prepare for the job market, highlighting disparities in access to career services, mentorship, and internship opportunities. The study revealed that proactive advice and peer networks significantly enhance career confidence. Zhang (2023) extended this line of inquiry by focusing on international doctoral students, emphasizing how institutional support and supervisor engagement play important roles in shaping career trajectories, particularly for those pursuing academic positions. With respect to leadership, Amu (2024) explored how international students in graduate business programs develop leadership competencies in multicultural environments and reported that cross-cultural team experiences and mentorship are crucial to their growth. Hu (2022) examined doctoral student socialization in leadership roles and the need for intentional leadership development programs. These studies highlight the need for more targeted career services, structured leadership training, and faculty-driven mentorship to support international students' long-term success.

Experiences and challenges constitute one of the overarching themes of dissertations, with 77 dissertations exploring this area. Subthemes often address lived experiences (Acquah, 2022; Demirazi, 2024; Hwang, 2023; Sanchez-Ramirez, 2023), perceptions (Han, 2022; Voelker, 2023), self-efficacy (Alfarhan, 2024; Alzukari, 2024), and challenges (Althobaiti, 2023; Mpofu, 2023; Kim, 2022). Dissertations examined international students' transitions to university life and adaptations to host communities. Demirazi (2024) reported that students

wanted stronger support from international offices, echoing concerns about institutional barriers that may impact enrollment. Sanchez-Ramirez (2023) reported that Mexican students gained language skills, cultural knowledge, and openness to diversity after studying abroad but became less inclined to engage socially with locals. Alzukari (2024) reported that academic self-efficacy and motivation were strong predictors of academic satisfaction and success, whereas social self-efficacy had a limited impact. Mpofu (2023) highlighted how COVID-19 disrupted support systems for African international students in South Africa, many of which were ineffective or exclusive. Kim (2022) noted that South Korean students in the U.S. experienced information overload, cultural isolation, and low campus involvement, underscoring the need for improved international office support and cultural training.

The studies commonly address students' lived experiences, perceptions, self-efficacy, and challenges. Cultural adjustment, language barriers, discrimination, and weak institutional support often contribute to emotional and academic stress. However, resilience is built through peer networks, leadership, and coping strategies. Faculty preparedness and intercultural competence also play important roles, with self-efficacy consistently linked to academic outcomes.

The theme of ***mobility and policy contexts*** has become increasingly important in recent years and often serves as an underlying rationale for debates about migration and brain drain/gain. Thirty-nine dissertations explored the theme of mobility and policy contexts. These studies reveal increasingly complex patterns in international student mobility shaped by both national and institutional policies, as well as individual decision-making processes. Important subthemes are migration policies and visa regimes (Dang, 2022; Domahidi, 2023; Odegbami, 2022; Oh, 2022), study-abroad decision making (Klopfenstein, 2023; Sandberg, 2022), and student enrollment (Brush, 2022; Buhendwa, 2023; Campbell, 2022; Pack, 2022).

Several studies have analyzed declining international enrollment and evolving recruitment strategies. Brush (2022) linked the drop in U.S. graduate enrollment to tighter visa restrictions, economic instability, and rising competition from alternative destinations such as Canada and Australia. Buhendwa (2023) emphasized the role of public–private partnerships in improving recruitment at midwestern universities. The sociopolitical dimensions of migration were also explored. Domahidi (2023) identified generational divides in U.S. college students' views on immigration and international students. Oh (2022) and Dang (2022) used econometric methods to examine how immigration policy impacts labor integration and educational outcomes. From a regulatory angle, Odegbami (2022) highlighted the tension between compliance and student support in U.S. international programs, advocating for oversight that protects both institutional integrity and student well-being. Moreover, Pack (2022) and Campbell (2022) examined how national policy and institutional messaging shape enrollment decisions among Chinese and Caribbean students. Klopfenstein (2023) explored why international genetic counseling students chose U.S. programs. The key reasons included limited training options at home, competitive local admissions, and the transferability of U.S. credentials.

These studies show how visa policies and migration frameworks affect students' academic and career plans. Although international mobility benefits host countries, students often face uncertainty from inconsistent policies. Their motivations for studying abroad often combine personal growth, career prospects, and cultural exposure, with families playing a central role in decision-making.

Social diversity and inclusion featured prominently in 73 dissertations, exploring how international students navigate issues of race, identity, and perceptions of systemic inequity. Key subthemes include race (McFarland, 2023; Sisaket, 2022; Zheng, 2023), religion (Elnakib, 2022; Jain, 2024; Tharp, 2022), identity (Gish-Lieberman, 2022; Li, 2023; Liu, 2024; Hou, 2024), and belonging (Huang, 2023; Stamp, 2022).

Several studies have critiqued how institutions frame diversity. Hou (2024) argued that international students are often presented with symbols of diversity without adequate structural support. Similarly, Stamp (2022) reported that "diversity abroad" initiatives in U.S. universities often overlook racial and socioeconomic barriers to participation. Liu (2024) highlighted the tensions that Chinese language instructors face between professional expectations and cultural authenticity. Li (2023) showed how English-language learning reshapes self-perception, linking language acquisition to racialization and identity negotiation.

Studies on racialization have documented how Asian students face subtle exclusions, such as stereotyping and social distancing, which erode belonging (e.g., Zheng, 2023). Gish-Lieberman (2022) explored how race and gender shape the professional identity of international teacher candidates in U.S. schools. Religion also plays a dual role—offering community for some and exclusion for others due to Islamophobia or tokenism (Elnakib, 2022). Across the studies, a strong sense of belonging was tied to institutional support, peer relationships, and active campus involvement. Identity was shown to be fluid and shaped by cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts, with students using strategies such as code-switching and self-advocacy to adapt.

Institutional support was examined in 15 dissertations as having an impact on institutional appeal and student satisfaction. These dissertations emphasize the ways in which higher education institutions can facilitate more inclusive, responsive, and effective environments for international students. Subthemes often addressed are retention (Opoku, 2023; Ladd-Minx, 2023) and support services (Ihuoma, 2023; Rodriguez, 2023; Gallie, 2023).

Opoku (2023) identified financial stress—especially among self-sponsored African students—as a key barrier to retention, calling for expanded aid and community programs. Ladd-Minx (2023) reported that community college students who study abroad are more likely to persist and complete degrees, suggesting that such programs could improve retention if adequately supported. Rodriguez (2023) reported that gaps in communication, limited outreach, and a lack of culturally tailored services hinder international students' access to support.

The dissertations reveal that while traditional recruitment strategies remain important, sociocultural networks, particularly parental connections and education agents, play increasingly significant roles in enrollment decisions. Retention is deeply affected by financial struggles, family support, and campus

engagement, even though traditional engagement metrics may not always predict persistence. Support services remain critical, with findings underscoring the need for culturally relevant resources, financial aid access, and tailored academic and psychological support structures.

Wellbeing featured a central focus in 36 dissertations, revealing a growing scholarly emphasis on the emotional, psychological, and stress-related dimensions of international student life. Subthemes include mental health (Carr, 2023; Jernigan, 2022; Kaur, 2024; Xu, 2024), stress (Wu, 2023; Jian, 2024), the impact of COVID-19 (Alshahrani, 2023; Myers, 2023), and coping strategies (Haitova, 2023; Ooi, 2022; Hantke, 2024).

Wu (2023) identified academic pressure, language barriers, and isolation as major stressors, with peer support and spiritual practices acting as buffers. Haitova (2023) examined the experiences of Muslim women navigating intersecting religious and cultural stressors. Xu (2024) tested a combined counseling and psychoeducational program, reporting reduced anxiety and improved academic engagement. Jernigan (2022) emphasized the need for culturally informed counseling and student involvement in mental health policy design. Kaur (2024) reported that East Asian students often avoid formal mental health services due to stigma, preferring informal support. Carr (2023) reported that the institutional context influences both access to and the effectiveness of counseling services. Alshahrani (2023) studied student perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic at an HBCU, finding support for ePortfolio use in emergency learning settings and offering recommendations for postpandemic implementation. Across studies, mental health outcomes were shaped by social support, cultural adaptation, and institutional response. Culturally competent services, clear crisis communication, and targeted interventions were seen as essential to student resilience and success.

In addition to the identified dominant themes, several other dissertations explored diverse but less common topics related to international students. These include crime reporting behaviors, cultural transitions, labor conditions, and multicultural friendships. Other dissertations have examined the development of critical thinking, student persistence, and the role of equity. Additionally, some studies have examined marketing strategies for international student recruitment, sexual assault prevention training, and urban revitalization efforts involving universities. While these topics provide valuable insights, their relatively low representation suggests a need for further research to deepen the understanding and inform institutional policies that better support international students across these varied dimensions.

Across the reviewed dissertations, a consistent set of solutions emerged to address the challenges faced by international students. Chief among these was the call for enhanced institutional support services tailored to the unique needs of this population. Researchers have recommended expanding academic advising, culturally sensitive mental health services, and peer mentoring programs to foster educational and social integration. A significant number of studies have emphasized the importance of faculty and staff training in intercultural competence to improve communication, advice, and classroom engagement with international students. Furthermore, targeted interventions such as orientation

programs, language development workshops, and wellness initiatives were identified as effective strategies for mitigating stress and promoting student adjustment. Several dissertations advocated integrating inclusive pedagogical practices that affirm diverse cultural backgrounds and learning styles, as well as institutional policies that promote equity, access, and a stronger sense of belonging. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for a systemic and responsive approach within higher education to ensure that international students not only succeed academically but also thrive holistically during their educational journey.

Methodological Approaches

A wide range of research methods have been employed across dissertations, reflecting the diverse approaches scholars take to investigate international student experiences. Research methods, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, are categorized by their primary approach. These findings are summarized in Table 1. Among dissertations analyzed, qualitative methodologies were the most prevalent, accounting for 48% (N=226) of the total. A total of 32% (N=152) of the studies were quantitative, whereas 20% (N=92) were mixed-methods. This distribution highlights a strong preference for qualitative inquiry.

Table 1: Breakdown of Research Methods

Method		Frequency
Qualitative	Interviews (semistructured, structured, in-depth)	56% (N=126)
	Phenomenological Study	15% (N=34)
	Narrative Inquiry	9% (N=20)
	Case Study	12% (N=28)
	Ethnographic Methods	8% (N=18)
Quantitative	Surveys (online, standardized, psychometric)	49% (N=74)
	Experimental/Quasi-Experimental	12% (N=18)
	Regression Analysis	11% (N=16)
	Path Analysis/Structural Equation Modeling	9% (N=14)
	Longitudinal Studies	10% (N=16)
	ANOVA/T tests	9% (N=14)
Mixed Methods	Survey + Interviews	50% (N=46)
	Longitudinal Mixed-Methods Study	20% (N=18)
	Case Study + Mixed Data	15% (N=14)
	Thematic/Content Analysis + Statistical Methods	11% (N=10)
	Social Network Analysis + Interviews	4% (N=4)

Further categorization within these broad methodological groups revealed a diverse range of research designs. Among qualitative studies, phenomenology, case studies, and ethnography are frequently employed. In contrast, survey-based and experimental designs dominated quantitative studies. The mixed-methods studies typically integrate qualitative interviews with statistical analyses, ensuring a balance between depth and generalizability. However, 53 studies (11%) did not align with any of these themes and were excluded from thematic analysis. Despite this, their methodologies were included in the statistical breakdown to maintain a comprehensive representation of research trends. This ensures that methodological insights reflect the full spectrum of dissertation approaches, regardless of thematic fit.

These findings suggest that qualitative research remains the dominant methodological approach, with substantial use of mixed methods. While a small subset of studies fell outside the thematic classification, their inclusion in the methodological analysis provides a complete picture of research design trends within the dataset.

Regional Contexts

This distribution by study site indicates a significant emphasis on North America, with relatively limited representation from other regions (see Table 2). Most dissertations (80.9%, N=380) were conducted in North America, indicating a strong concentration of research in this region. Europe followed with 7.9% (N=37), whereas Asia accounted for 5.1% (N=24) of the studies. Representations from Australia (1.3%, N=6) and Africa (0.4%, N=2) were minimal, and no studies were conducted solely in South America. A small proportion of dissertations (4.3%, N=20) took a global or mixed approach, spanning multiple continents. Additionally, 2.1% (N=10) of the studies did not specify their geographic focus. These figures reflect a predominant focus on North American and Western institutional settings, indicating a need for broader geographic representation in future research on international student experiences.

Table 2: Study Site by Region

Region (Continent)	Frequency and Percentage
North America	380 (80.9%)
Europe	37 (7.9%)
Asia	24 (5.1%)
Australia	6 (1.3%)
Africa	2 (0.4%)
South America	None specified
Global/Mixed	20 (4.3%)
Unspecified	10 (2.1%)
Total	*470 (100%)*

Disciplinary Orientation

Across the dissertations reviewed, a total of 164 distinct academic disciplines were identified, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of international student research. When accounting for all individual classifications within multidisciplinary entries, the most frequently represented field was higher education (0745), which appeared in 211 dissertations. This was followed by Education (0515) in 82 dissertations and Multicultural Education (0455) in 61 dissertations.

Other prominently featured fields included Educational Leadership (0449), with 63 occurrences; English as a Second Language (0441), with 23 dissertations; and Educational Sociology (0340), with 26 dissertations. Additional key areas were Education Policy (0458), International Relations (0601), and Educational Administration (0514).

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework draws on a wide array of conceptual lenses, reflecting the interdisciplinary scope of the research and the complexity of international student experiences (see Table 3, at the end of the paper). Several themes show particularly rich theoretical engagement, most notably teaching, learning and academic practices; acculturation and intercultural competence; and experiences and challenges. In the context of learning, especially language learning, theories such as sociocultural theory, self-determination theory, and social cognitive theory are frequently used to examine learner agency and motivation. Language socialization, willingness to communicate, and second language acquisition theories also featured prominently. Research on academic writing often draws from academic literacies, transformative learning theory, and activity theory to explore how writing practices mediate engagement with disciplinary norms and knowledge construction.

Beyond formal learning, studies addressing acculturation and intercultural competence frequently draw on acculturation theory, cross-cultural adaptation theory, and intercultural communication competence. Moreover, analyses of students' experiences and challenges often turn to intersectionality, critical race theory, and community cultural wealth, which offer insight into how structures of inequality and cultural capital shape the day-to-day realities of international students.

DISCUSSION

In analyzing the broad range of doctoral dissertations related to international students in higher education, we identified eight overarching themes: teaching, learning and academic practices; acculturation and intercultural competence; career development and leadership; experiences and challenges; mobility and policy contexts; social diversity and inclusion; institutional support; and

wellbeing. While these areas often overlap, they also reveal distinct priorities and gaps in doctoral-level research.

The themes of teaching, learning and academic practices are often focused on academic supervision, learning, writing practices, and the usage of technology. Although many studies acknowledged teaching and learning strategies, they rarely critiqued the underlying pedagogical assumptions. Previous studies have focused on the limited exploration of various learning needs (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021). Similarly, challenges in academic writing and supervisor relationships were prominent.

Acculturation and intercultural competence often address issues of adaptation, adjustment, and integration. We find that dissertations frequently advocated enhanced intercultural competence training, yet only a few explored the nuances of how these processes unfold. Zhao and Harji (2024) reported that research on international students' acculturation has expanded steadily with increasing output across multiple disciplines, with most studies focusing on macrolevel aspects of acculturation, whereas emerging research directions have not yet taken up.

Career development and leadership were more commonly explored within applied fields, although the focus was often narrow, with limited attention to poststudy transitions. Jing et al. (2020) identified employability and social integration as growing areas of research focus. However, many gaps remain in the exploration of how international students navigate career challenges, particularly in global labor markets after graduation. Dissertations under the experiences and challenges theme frequently address lived experiences, perceptions, and self-efficacy. These studies illustrated the struggles students face with language fluency, academic writing, and cultural adjustment. The frequent mention of challenges aligns with Gao's (2021) findings on recurring struggles, including the difficulty of adapting to different academic systems and the emotional toll of being away from home. These findings reinforce the need for greater institutional support in fostering self-efficacy and student agency.

Mobility and policy contexts surfaced as critical areas for investigation, with many dissertations addressing the factors influencing migration, study-abroad decision making, and student enrollment. Studies often describe the impact of socioeconomic factors and institutional prestige on students' choices rather than critically examining the policies that govern student mobility. Shen et al. (2022) assert that mobility decisions are shaped not only by individual aspirations but also by national policies and global labor market positioning.

Social diversity and inclusion were other discussed themes. Dissertations pointed out issues related to race, religion, and identity. Despite this, most studies lack deep engagement with intersectionality or systemic exclusion. Lomer and Mittelmeier (2021) noted that binary categories such as 'international' versus 'domestic' often obscure the diversity of international students' experiences. Research in this area has called for a more nuanced understanding of how students' identities intersect and shape their experiences within higher education.

Institutional support was often discussed in terms of services such as orientation programs, language support, and counseling services. While

institutions provide resources, they may not always align with students' needs, particularly for doctoral students, who face unique challenges.

The theme of well-being, especially mental health, emerged across multiple dissertations. Numerous studies have identified associations among stress, acculturative stress, and discrimination with adverse mental health outcomes, noting that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further intensified these challenges. The increased attention given to coping strategies reflects a growing concern for holistic support. Previous systematic reviews highlight the high rates of depression and mental health challenges among international students, driven by factors such as cultural adjustment, institutional neglect, family conflicts (Wu et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2025), limited social support and language difficulties (Wen-Xuan et al., 2025). Thus, institutional culture and support systems are important in shaping students' well-being (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Yin et al., 2024).

Geographically, most dissertations focused on North American and European countries, reflecting a continued Western-centric orientation in the field. This regional concentration limits the applicability of findings to non-Western contexts and underscores the need to expand research to include underrepresented regions, particularly in Asia, Australia, and Africa. Including research from underrepresented regions enriches the analysis by offering new perspectives on international students that may differ significantly from those documented in traditionally dominant academic contexts. For example, a bibliometric review of research on international student mobility in Asia by Pham et al. (2021) highlighted region-specific concerns such as student satisfaction, service quality, and mental health. Future research should consider analyzing content by region to determine how research themes and concerns differ on the basis of geographical context.

Among the dissertations, the predominant research methods (qualitative) reflect the field's ongoing interest in exploring lived experiences and capturing nuanced, context-specific insights. This also indicates that the body of doctoral dissertation research remains centered on studying individual experiences rather than testing broader theoretical claims. While this approach has been instrumental in revealing complex student realities, the use of quantitative and mixed-methods research provides a methodological balance that yields more diverse and empirically generalizable designs focusing on international students. In particular, dissertations employing mixed methods designs or advanced statistical analyses provide deeper, multidimensional insights into international student experiences, capturing not only broad patterns and correlations but also the nuanced lived realities behind the quantitative data.

With respect to disciplinary orientation, the broad representation highlights the complexity and relevance of international student issues across multiple domains—ranging from pedagogy, leadership, and policy to linguistics, mental health, and international affairs. The findings underscore the need for continued cross-disciplinary engagement to address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by international students globally.

Notably, certain theories, particularly sociocultural theory, transformative learning, and self-determination theory, appear across multiple themes. Their recurrence shows a shared focus in the literature on the relationship between individual agencies and broader institutional, social, and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, there is a lack of theoretical integration across many dissertations. Few studies explicitly apply or build upon established frameworks such as cultural adaptation models, identity development theories, or social capital theory. By observing this trend, Jing et al. (2020) and Abdullah et al. (2014) noted the need for deeper conceptual engagement to advance the field. Addressing this theoretical gap will enhance conceptual clarity and support more coherent, transferable findings across global contexts. Bridging these research gaps is essential for building a more inclusive, methodologically balanced, and globally relevant field of international student scholarship.

This study revealed several emerging gaps in international student research. One significant gap is the limited attention given to digital and online education, especially in the context of the post-COVID-19 learning environment. Despite the global shift toward hybrid and remote learning, few studies have examined how international students experience and adapt to online education models, which highlights the need for further inquiry into digital inclusion, engagement, and instructional effectiveness.

While AI tools offer valuable assistance in academic writing, the number of doctoral dissertations on this topic is limited. Recent scholarship has raised serious doubts about AI use in academic writing, especially for multilingual and nonnative English writers. For example, Liang et al. (2023) reported that GPT detectors often misclassify nonnative English writing as AI-generated, risking unfair academic sanctions. Studies also critique how AI-assisted writing may perpetuate language hierarchies rather than dismantle them, calling for policies that prioritize ethical AI literacy over surveillance (Weber-Wulff et al., 2023). Future research should examine the implications of AI tools among international students and address those concerns accordingly. Intersectionality is another critical gap. While topics such as internationalization and globalization appear frequently, many studies lack an intersectional lens that considers the overlapping impacts of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and immigration background. First-generation international students and students from historically marginalized regions (e.g., the Global South) remain underrepresented in the current body of work.

Our findings highlight research trends that point to several areas where higher education policy may need to evolve. While longstanding challenges such as language barriers and cultural adjustment continue to appear in recent dissertations (de Wit & Altbach, 2022; Hoffman, 2009; Hwang et al., 2010), the growing attention to mental health, career transitions, and intersectional identities suggests a shifting focus in international student research. These trends indicate that institutions may need to review policies related to culturally responsive mental health support, targeted career development programs, and inclusive practices that acknowledge students' diverse identities. The increasing focus on digital learning also signals the importance of ensuring equitable access to

technology and online academic tools. By aligning policies with these emerging areas of scholarly attention, institutions can better anticipate evolving needs and support international students' academic, emotional, and professional well-being in a changing global higher education environment.

CONCLUSION

This content analysis of doctoral dissertations offers a comprehensive overview of current research trends, challenges, and methodological approaches in the field of international student studies. The literature highlights several major themes, including academic and language integration, cultural adaptation, mental health, institutional support, mobility and policy, equity and inclusion, and career development. These themes represent both long-standing and newly recognized priorities. While the majority of studies have been grounded in qualitative approaches and focused on Western contexts, the findings reveal a growing recognition of the complex, intersectional experiences of international students.

An emerging area not yet widely addressed in the dissertations is the role of AI tools, such as ChatGPT and Claude, in shaping international students' academic practices and learning experiences. These technologies increasingly influence how students access information, complete assignments, and engage with academic writing. Future research should critically examine how international students use AI tools, the ethical implications of AI-assisted learning, and how institutions can support equitable and responsible use of these technologies in global higher education.

Several key takeaways emerge from the findings of this study. First, language and cultural integration continue to be core challenges that demand sustained academic and institutional attention. Second, well-being and career needs are increasingly visible within the literature but require deeper, culturally grounded exploration. Third, institutional support systems must evolve to address equity, inclusion, and access in a more intentional manner to ensure that international students are succeeding both academically and holistically. Finally, broader geographic representation and stronger theoretical application are essential to advancing the global understanding of this population. These insights offer practical implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers striving to enhance the international student experience and foster more equitable, inclusive, and informed global education systems.

Finally, the study has its limitations. The exclusive reliance on ProQuest means that dissertations written in languages other than English or housed in nonparticipating institutions may be underrepresented. Furthermore, the database does not capture unpublished or institutionally archived dissertations, which could provide important regional or localized insights. Despite these constraints, the study provides a valuable overview of emerging scholarly themes and methodological patterns and invites further research that incorporates a broader linguistic and institutional range.

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Table 3: Theoretical Frameworks

Themes	Subthemes	Theoretical Frameworks
Teaching, Learning and Academic Practices	Academic Supervision	Cultural Capital Theory; Inventory of Academic Advising Function; College Choice Models; Mentoring Theory; Constructivist Grounded Theory; Human Agency Theory; Social Constructivism; Experiential Learning Theory; Interactional Space
	Learning	Network-Embedded Social Capital; Individual Network of Practice; Language Transfer; Interlingual Errors; Confucian Heritage Culture Perspective; Cognitive Control; SOI Model of Generative Learning; Transition Model; Acculturation Theory; Cognitivism; Linguistic Responsiveness; School Learning Model; Systemic Functional Linguistics Framework; Blended Online Learning; Theory of Second Language Acquisition; Language-Ideological Theory; Stereotype Threat Theory; Communities of Practice Theory; SLA Theories; Language-As-Social-Practice Theory; Social Identity Theory; Ethic of Care; Ethic of Community; Hierarchy of Needs; Validation Theory; Willingness to Communicate Theory; Anxiety-Buffering Mode; Language Socialization Theory; Subtractive Schooling Theory; Culture Loss; Register Analysis; Social Cognitive Theory; Sociocultural Theory; Ecological Perspective; Diffusion of Innovation Theory; Metacognition Theory; Self-Regulation Theory; Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; Self-Determination Theory; Intergroup Anxiety Theory
	Writing Practices	Multicultural Literacies; Reflexivity; Socio-Cultural Theory; Constructivism; Academic Literacies; Ecological Perspectives; Holistic Writing Assessment; Transformative Learning Theory; Postcolonial Theory; Critical University Studies; Genre-Based Writing Instruction; Contrastive Rhetoric; Intercultural Rhetoric; Critical Contrastive Rhetoric; Glocalization of English; Academic Literacies Approach; Activity Theory; Writer Identity; Labeling Theory; Attribution Theory; Cultural Capital and Habitus

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	Use of Technology	Gamification Theory; Engagement Theory; Constructivist Learning Theory; Experiential Learning; Activity Theory- Based Model; Socio-Technical Pedagogical Usability Framework; User Localization And Experience Frameworks; Cultural Dimension Framework; Student Engagement Theory; Social Media Engagement Theory
Acculturation and Intercultural competence	Acculturation	Safety climate; Feminist theory; Theory of Planned Behavior; Acculturation Theory; Soft Power; Cognitive Control; Activity Systems Analysis; Institutional Departure Theory; Non-native-English-Speaking Student Retention Model; Minority Stress Theory; Sociocultural Theory; Inner Speech Theory; Acculturative Stress Theory; Stress and Depression Frameworks; Social Cognitive Career Theory
	Adaptation	Narrative Inquiry; Identity Re/Construction; U-Curve Model of Adaptation; Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory; Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory
	Adjustment	Intersectionality Theory; Transition Theory
	Integration	Integration Theory; Organizational History Engagement Framework; Three-Dimensional Inquiry; Theory of Experience
	Intercultural Competence	Cultural Capital Theory, Internationalization Framework; Bicultural Model; Experiential Learning Theory; Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC); Feedback Literacy Theory; Intercultural Competence Theory; Intercultural Communication Theory; Intercultural Development Continuum; Social Learning Theory; Acculturation; Intergroup Contact Theory; Transformative Learning; Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy; Bioecological Theory; Intercultural Knowledge Frameworks; Intercultural Learning; Intercultural Competence Theory

Career Development and Leadership	Career Development	Model of Employment Support for International Doctoral Students (MESIDS); Self-Determination Theory; Positional Advantage; Acculturation Theory; SCCT, RCID; Professional Socialization Theory; Human Capital Theory; Neo-Racism Theory; Career Ecosystems Theory; Cultural Intelligence Theory; Transformative Learning Theory
	Leadership	Authentic leadership theory (SELP); Socialization Theory; Social Capital Theory; Servant Leadership; Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory; Leadership Competency Model; Courageous Followership; Hierarchy of Needs; Intercultural Learning, Leadership Development
Experiences and Challenges	Lived experiences	Social Support Theory; Experiential Learning Theory; Learning Outcomes Classification; Self-Determination Theory; Liberalism, Colonialism; Cultural Adaptation Theory; Community Cultural Wealth; African Critical Theory; Critical Race Theory, Transborder Identity; Double Consciousness; Social Support Theory, Stress and Coping Theory; Wellbeing Theory; Intersectionality; Social justice; Cultural Attachment Theory, Intersubjectivity Theory; Cross-Cultural Transition Theory; Community Cultural Wealth; Transition Theory; Grounded Theory; Social Media and Digital Transition Theory; Transformative Paradigm; Socio-Cultural Theory; Critical Race Theory; China as Method; Neoliberalism; Social Justice in Language Education; Theory of Capital, Field, and Habitus
	Perceptions	Trauma-Informed Pedagogy; PICO Framework; Organizational Justice Theory
	Self-efficacy	Self-Efficacy Theory; Technology Acceptance Model; Constructivism Theory; Social Cognitive Theory; IEO Model; Social Cognitive Career Theory; Science Identity Model
	Challenges	Schlossberg's Transition Theory; Lizzio's Five Senses of Success Model; Critical Race Theory, Neo-Racism, Postcolonial Theory; Lazarus' Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping; Uncertainty Management Theory; Cognitive Behavioral Theory; Cultural Sensitivity within Music Therapy; Activity Theory Framework

Mobility and Policy Contexts	Migration	Household Bargaining; Risk Aversion Theory; Foucauldian Knowledge-Power Theory; Human Capital Theory; Habits of Mind Framework; Cultural Capital Theory; Economic Migration Theory; Critical Race Theory; Hierarchy of Needs; Policy Pervasion Theory; Migration Policy Theory
	Enrollment	Logic Model; Yield Management Theory; Marketing Theory; Stakeholder Theory; Social Constructivism; Sociocultural Theory; Social Learning Theory; Push-Pull Theory; Model of Student Choice; College Choice Process Model; Organizational Institutionalism
	Study-abroad decision making	Design Thinking
Social Diversity and Inclusion	Race	Eyes Theory; Neo-Racism Framework; Critical Race Theory, White Institutional Presence, Anti-Blackness; Critical Race Theory; Social Dominance Orientation; Intersectionality; Latino Critical Race Theory; Intersectionality; Migration Studies Theory; Feminism; Community Cultural Wealth, Critical Feminist Theory; Decolonial Feminism, Transnational Feminism, Resilience Theory, Self-Advocacy Theory; Knowable Community; Critical Intercultural Studies; Social Cognitive Career Theory; Critical Whiteness Studies; Black Racial Identity Development; Sense of Place
	Religion	No theories used

	Identity	Sociocultural Theory; Poststructural Theories; Superdiversity; Inner Circle English; Cosmopolitanism; Hybrid Identities; Third Space; ELF and ChELF Frameworks ; Community of Practice; Language Investment; Sociocultural Perspectives on SLA; Transformative Learning Theory; Identity Construction Theory; Folk Linguistics; Identity Negotiation Theory; Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory; Intersectionality Theory; Looking-Glass Self Theory; Erikson's 8 Stages of Development; Possible Selves Theory; Transnational Identity
	Belonging	Institutional Ethnography; Integration Model; Sense of Belonging Theory; Positioning Theory; Interdependent Self-Construal Theory
Institutional Support	Retention	IEO Model of Student Involvement; Theory of Experiential Learning; Theory of Student Retention; Theory of Social Integration and Retention
	Support Services	Reception Theory; Positive Psychology; Institutional Theory; Community of Practice
Wellbeing	Mental Health	Expectancy Violation Theory; Basic Psychological Needs Theory; Occupational Therapy; Health Management; Behavioral Model of Health Services Use; Health Belief Model; Help-Seeking Behavior Theory; Resilience Theory; Social Support Theory
	Stress	Psychological Stress Framework
	Impact of COVID-19	Trust, Confidence, and Cooperation (TCC) Model
	Coping Strategies	Postmodern Feminist Theory; Adult Personal Resilience Theory; Stress and Coping Theory