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Rethinking International Student Mobility within Higher Education Internationalization: A Systematic Literature Review and Outcome-Driven Model

Anushka Sinha[1], Adya Sharma[2], Nehajoan Panackal[3]
Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies-Pune
Affiliated to Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India

Corresponding Author: Nehajoan Panackal
Nehajoan.panackal@scmspune.ac.in

ABSTRACT: *The internationalization of higher education has become a priority for institutions worldwide, as it enhances academic quality, promotes global knowledge exchange, and strengthens institutional credibility. Within this context, international students play a central role in driving cross-border mobility and shaping global education systems. However, research shows that, in developing economies, the proportion of international students who participate in mobility remains lower than that in developed countries. A review of the literature further reveals a lack of research examining the interconnections among international student mobility, sustainability, and internationalization within the Sustainable Development Goals framework. To address these gaps, the present study conducts a systematic literature review of 79 research articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. The findings highlight the limited integration of knowledge in this area and underscore the need for a structured, sustainable approach to international student mobility. This study offers valuable insights for universities, policymakers, and international offices in designing inclusive and impactful mobility initiatives that expand opportunities for international students, particularly those from underrepresented groups.*

Keywords: *Higher Education, International Students, Internationalization, Student Mobility, Sustainability.*

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INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education (IHE) is vital for most educational institutions worldwide, as it enhances educational quality (Schäfer & Dali, 2019). IHE helps students develop the skills they need to succeed in the increasingly interconnected world. In a sense, cross-border education became a source of future skilled labor for developed nations and, in the process, promoted the internationalization of education. Students with multicultural exposure are better equipped to face adverse and challenging situations (Bi, 2025; Nyamsuren et al., 2024; Schäfer & Dali, 2019). They also have a broader intellectual horizon and a more remarkable ability to appreciate other perspectives. The internationalization of education integrates international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, functions (teaching, research, and service), and delivery of higher education (Knight, 2004). In modern times, the internationalization of education is inevitable and necessary (Woo & Wang, 2023).

Transnational mobility, encompassing the movement of faculty, students, and educational programs, is a crucial aspect of IHEs (Lin et al., 2025; Lo et al., 2022). International student recruitment has been a focus of universities worldwide for some time and is widely recognized as a key global trend. International students opt for mobility for reasons that could be individual, sociocultural, interpersonal, or organizational (Hemati et al., 2026). The motivations behind this mobility could be academic (Amaro et al., 2024), economic (Lo et al., 2022), cultural (Nyamsuren et al., 2024), or even political (Majee & Ress, 2020). Academic motives revolve around acquiring knowledge (Guo et al., 2022), achieving international quality standards (Schäfer & Dali, 2019), enriching the institution's curriculum, mutual collaboration in research, and accomplishing the educational institution's mission.

Table 1 presents definitions of internationalization from the scholarly literature.

Table 1: Meaning of Internationalization

Author/s, Year	Concept of Internationalization
Knight, 2004	At the National, Sectorial, and Institutional level, Internationalization is the process of integrating an "international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education."
Yeravdekar & Tiwari, 2014	Internationalization involves integrating an international, intercultural dimension into higher education to create globally competent students through both inbound and outbound mobility programs.
Schäfer & Dali, 2019	The study emphasized internationalization as an institutional strategy for developing research partnerships, enhancing curriculum development, developing global competencies, and global engagement in higher education.
Zhu & Zhang, 2024	Internationalization is characterized by international student mobility (ISM), the admissions system, the internationalization of the curriculum, and quality pedagogical practices, which are important for institutionalizing internationalization.
Brooks et al., 2024	International student mobility is an important aspect of Internationalization; Inward mobility helps to exert soft power, generate income, enhance prestige, and cultural diversity.

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positioning in the global marketplace, and collaboration on grant-funded projects (Morley et al., 2018). Social and cultural motives aim to enhance the social and cultural understanding of different cultures worldwide (Nyamsuren et al., 2024), prepare and mentor students to become global citizens, and enhance a deep understanding of international issues so that students can play a vital role in social transformation. Political motives for international student mobility include promoting cultural exchange with other nations, deepening understanding of other economies, and advancing international education as a source of peace and harmony among nations.

International students are important stakeholders in IHE; the nature and definition of international students vary depending on their level of involvement in IHE. According to the OECD (2023), an international student is a learner who leaves their home country with the primary objective of studying at an institution in a different country under a student visa. UNESCO (2022) defines international students as students who cross national borders to enrol in courses outside their country of origin. Table 2 provides a more in-depth understanding of the types of international students.

Table 2: Types of international students based on mobility

Parameter for Classification	Types	Meaning	Relevant literature
Based on the mode of internationalization	Physical Mobility	Students who travel abroad and leave their country of origin to study with a student visa are classified as international students based on their physical mobility.	Liu, 2021; Ivan et al., 2022
	Virtual Exchange	Physical mobility may be expensive and not always affordable; students who engage in internationalization through virtual exchange, such as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), fall under this category.	Yue et al.,2023; Keshishi et al., 2023.
	Short-term students	These are students who travel to other countries and participate in semester-long exchange programs that range from 6 months to 1 year. They take courses at the institution	Suryanto et al., 2022

		in the country of visit, and the credits are mapped and transferred to the institution of origin upon successful completion of the exchange.	
Based on the Duration of Study	Degree-seeking students	These are students who travel to institutions in other countries to obtain a degree, such as a bachelor's, master's, PhD, or a postdoctoral fellowship.	Cunningham et al., 2025;
Based on degrees	Undergraduate degree	Students pursue undergraduate programs abroad for international exposure and access to high-quality education at an early stage. Popular courses include engineering, computer science, and social sciences. According to the OECD, in 2023, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are popular destinations for undergraduate programs.	Cunningham et al., 2025
	Postgraduate degree	Specialized skills and education, as well as employability, are among the reasons students pursue a postgraduate degree abroad. Business, Engineering, Health Sciences, and Medicine are popular courses for postgraduate programs.	Cunningham et al., 2025
	PhD and Post doc experience	Research opportunities, funding, supervisor expertise, research in niche areas, and access to world-class labs are among the reasons students pursue PhD or postdoctoral fellowships abroad. These	Cunningham et al., 2025

		programs could be funded by the institutions. For the institutions, one of the benefits is reflection in global rankings.	
Based on funding	Self-Financed	This category of students finances their own study abroad through their own sources or through family support. A common practice is to take out education loans for study.	Liu et al., 2023
	Scholarship or sponsored	This category of students receives grants, financial aid from universities, the government, or international organisations. Example Erasmus+ scholars.	Akhtar et al., 2024
Based on Motivation	Academic-focused Students	These are students who wish to study abroad to acquire specialized skills and qualifications that may not be readily available in their home countries. They seek higher-quality education.	Yue et al., 2022
	Career-oriented Students	These are students who study abroad with the specific aim of getting employed in the country of study; they seek a work permit and global career prospects.	Yasmin et al., 2022
	Migration-oriented Students	These are students who see IHE as a pathway to permanent residency and citizenship in the host country.	Robertson, 2013
	Cultural Learners	Cultural immersion and global experience are the drivers for students who travel and study abroad.	Knight, 2015

Within the landscape of developing economies, the percentage of international students opting for physical mobility is far too low compared with that in developed economies; thus, the affordability of mobility remains a major challenge. Students in developing economies continue to prioritize the West as their preferred destination for higher education. This could be attributed to the universities' global rankings (Hill et al., 2019), perceived benefits (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019), employment prospects (Morley et al., 2021), poststudy work permits, opportunities, better infrastructure, curriculum (Guo et al., 2022), and research ecosystem (Yue et al., 2023). A study by Karki et al. (2026) found that South Asian students prefer Canada as their destination for higher education because culturally informed services and social support networks play a role in student well-being. Mobility also poses challenges for international students. International students face various academic challenges due to differences in curricula, teaching methods, and learning environments (Deuchar, 2022), which can lead to stress and mental health issues (Suyuhan et al., 2026). To attract student mobility for higher education, developing economies need to rethink and strategize. This would help achieve an equitable balance in transnational mobility.

A review of international student mobility through this lens is important for analyzing the impact on three interconnected pillars of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social. International mobility relies heavily on long-haul flights, which have been criticized for their environmental impacts (Ramaswamy et al., 2021). Rising living costs, currency instability, and limited work rights associated with international student mobility are causes of concern for economic sustainability. Homesickness, isolation, language barriers, loneliness, stress, culture shock, and discrimination are among the sociocultural challenges international students face that impact social sustainability (Dam et al., 2026). There is a need for a comprehensive study that combines and analyzes these diverse aspects to provide a robust framework of international student mobility. Furthermore, a review of the literature revealed a need for further investigation to assess the interconnections between sustainability and internationalization, with a view to linking them to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This article aims to address the gap noted by Buckner & Stein (2020) by examining sustainability as a justice issue for international student mobility. The objectives of the research are as follows:

O1: To follow the guidelines of a systematic literature review to review and synthesize the literature on international student mobility within the internationalization of higher education.

O2: To identify and categorize the key drivers, benefits, challenges, and barriers associated with international student mobility in the context of internationalization of higher education.

O3: To propose a comprehensive framework (Input-Outcome-Impact) that would chalk the research journey thus far and provide a roadmap for future research to enhance internationalization strategies equitably and sustainably for international students.

METHOD

A systematic literature review (SLR) is a practical methodology for evaluating scholarly publications to understand the domain's literature, identify the evolution of research domains, and analyze trends and emerging research areas. Researchers have adopted the SLR proposed by Denyer & Tranfield (2009) and a meta-analysis, following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, to synthesize the literature on mobility and the internationalization of higher education. The first stage of an SLR clearly defines the research questions to be addressed. In the current study, three research questions were identified. Research Question 1 (RQ1) examines the extent of the literature on international student mobility within the internationalization of higher education, covering trends by year, databases, key sources, key countries, and key researchers in this domain. Research Question 2 (RQ2) provided insights into the methodology and key findings of the studies covered. The third research question examined the challenges and opportunities of mobility and internationalization in higher education, thereby paving the way for future research.

Data Collection

A preliminary study was conducted to understand the relevant keywords in the domain of study. The authors have examined studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, well-established databases that provide high-quality, multidisciplinary research across scientific journals, books, and conference proceedings. The databases cover a wide range of subjects, including social sciences, life sciences, arts and humanities, physical sciences, and health sciences. All important articles were selected from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. To identify relevant keywords, the researchers thoroughly reviewed the literature on mobility and the internationalization of higher education. Words that appeared repeatedly were selected for the search. Scopus and Web of Science used the title, abstract, and keyword fields. The search strings were “internalization” OR “internalization" OR “globalization" AND “higher education" OR “HEI" AND “mobility”. Boolean operators' AND/OR' were used to refine the search. The initial search yielded 1405 documents in Scopus and 1534 in Web of Science. The search was conducted in April 2025.

Scopus search

The Scopus search was further refined to include only English-language journal articles. Journal articles undergo rigorous peer review, ensuring their validity, reliability, and quality. Articles offer comprehensive methodologies, detailed discussions, results, and findings that yield valuable insights. Limiting the study to only English helped to maintain consistency in evaluating and synthesizing the articles. The Scopus search identified exact keywords to yield more accurate results. The exact keywords included the most frequently used

keywords and those that closely represented the study area. "", "Internationalization", "Mobility", "Student Mobility", "Higher Education", "Internationalization of higher education", "Internationalization of higher education", "Globalization", "International student mobility", and "International students" were included as keywords. Narrowing the keywords helped keep the search accurate, concise, and within the study's framework. This also helped to eliminate irrelevant studies. Only articles published in journals in the final publication stage were considered. Conference proceedings and book chapters were excluded from the study. Journals include a rigorous peer review process that ensures the reliability and credibility of the article. The top 10 journals in the domain were considered to ensure the inclusion of the best, most highly relevant articles in this study. Filtering the journals helped maintain thematic relevance and subject focus through a balanced, comprehensive perspective. Selecting the top ten journals helped ensure the review's relevance and conceptual depth, as leading journals tend to publish robust, methodologically sound articles. It also helped to source manageable data for in-depth synthesis. After all the exclusion and inclusion criteria were applied, 183 articles remained.

Web of Science search

Following the search query in Scopus, "Internationalization", "Internationalization", "Mobility", "Student Mobility", "Higher Education", "Internationalization of higher education", "Internationalization of higher education", "Globalization", "International student mobility", and "International students" were the keywords used to search titles, abstracts and keywords in WOS. The search yielded 1534 results. Only journal articles were considered; conference titles were excluded from the search. As in the Scopus search, the top 10 journal sources were selected to obtain a comprehensive perspective. The WOS core collection comprises various citation indices, including the "Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE)", "Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)", "Arts & Humanities Citation Index (AHCI)", and "Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)". SSCI was selected for the study because it covers high-impact social science journals. The journals in the SSCI have undergone rigorous peer review and have impact factors published in the Journal Citation Reports. Compared with the ESCI and AHCI, the SSCI has higher standards, greater global visibility, and greater research evaluation weight. SCIE is generally used in science and engineering studies. After the exclusion and inclusion factors were applied, 253 WOS articles remained.

Final Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

With respect to the final inclusion criterion, common articles that were both Scopus- and WOS-indexed were included in the study. To achieve this goal, the results of both databases were compared with those of relevant studies. This inclusion criterion helped to reduce selection bias. This ensured that influential studies were not missed. This ensured that high-quality, peer-reviewed, reputable

sources were taken. It also ensures the credibility of the articles and the integrity of the indexing process. This step also ensured that low-quality, predatory journals were not included. This resulted in 96 articles. The articles were studied in detail to understand the objectives, methodology, results, and relevance of the current study. On the basis of preliminary investigations and subsequent brainstorming sessions among the researchers, 17 articles were identified as outside the scope of the current study and excluded from the final analysis. Seventeen articles were excluded on the basis of predefined criteria, including irrelevance to the study objectives, duplication or insufficient focus on international student mobility. The final number of articles included in the study was 79. The steps followed in the study to obtain the final 79 articles are shown in Figure 1.

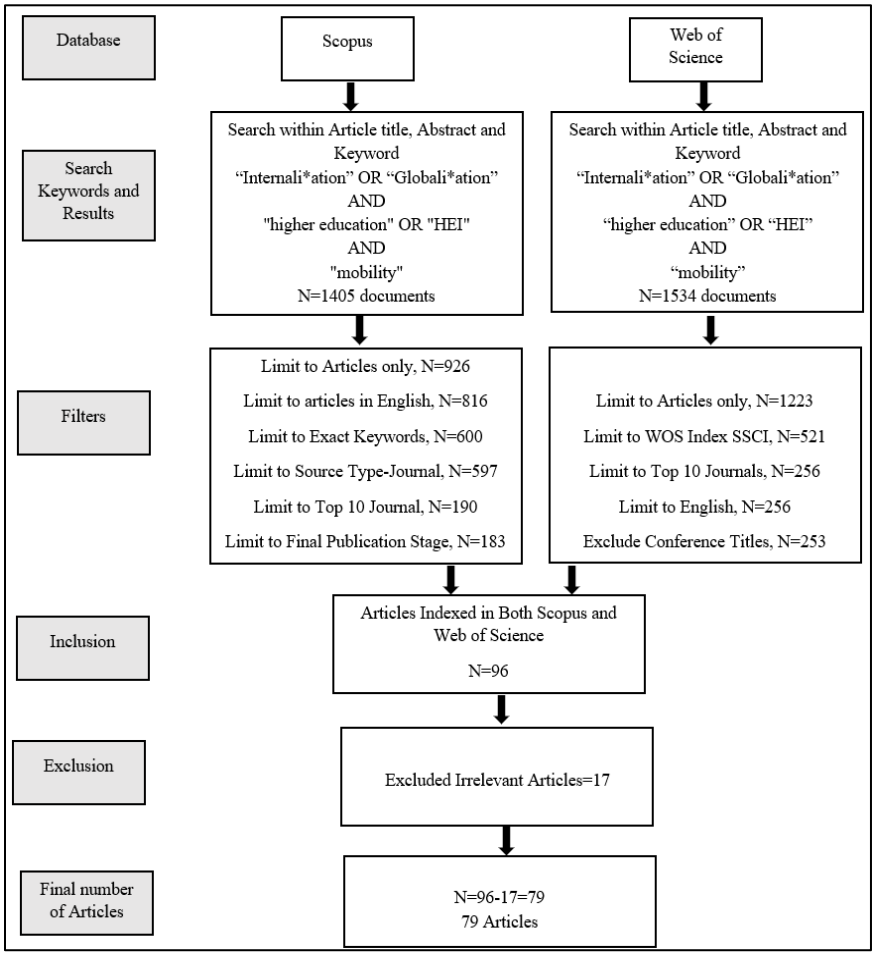

Figure 1: *Steps in PRISMA*

RESULTS

The earliest paper on the data was from 2007. There were 42 papers published between 2010 and 2019 and 35 between 2020 and 2024. Table 3 shows the top 5 journals with the most articles in this research domain. The highest number of papers in the research area were published in higher education journals, followed by the Journal of Studies in Higher Education. Thirty-two papers focused on one or more European countries, and 37 focused on one or more Asian countries. The top five journals were: Higher Education, Journal of Studies in International Education, Journal of International Students, Studies in Higher Education, and Higher Education Research & Development.

Table 3: Top 5 Journals in this domain

Journal Name	Number of Articles
Higher Education	18
Journal of Studies in International Education	14
Journal of International Students	12
Studies in Higher Education	8
Higher Education Research & Development	8

Emergent clusters based on analysis of the selected papers

The clusters were obtained through the thematic synthesis given by Thomas & Harden (2008). The key steps included PRISMA screening, followed by data extraction, brainstorming and coding, category development, cluster derivation, and, finally, model construction. The conceptual factors were extracted by studying the abstracts, findings, and discussions of the 79 articles. The authors brainstormed, analyzed, and applied axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) to organize and connect initial codes into higher-level categories. The three researchers independently coded the studies that generated 40 open codes, and intercoder reliability was assessed by comparing the coding across researchers to ensure consistency in how the themes (e.g., mobility patterns, outcomes, and impacts) were interpreted. Discrepancies in coding were identified, particularly in overlapping areas such as economic factors versus financial outcomes or sociocultural influences versus impacts. The research team conducted iterative discussions to reconcile differences and group similar codes under broader thematic categories. The codes were consolidated into 12 focused codes and organized into three overarching clusters. This structured approach ensured transparency, consistency, and analytical depth in the final thematic framework. Conceptually coherent clusters were developed by aggregating categories that consistently cooccurred across studies. The clusters represent the patterns and

influences on student mobility, outcomes, and impact. The clusters are briefly described in Table 4, and each cluster is then explained in detail.

Table 4: Emergent clusters

Cluster	Description	Authors	Avenues for future research
Cluster 1: Patterns and influences on international student mobility			
Economic	Funding, destination country's economic growth, scholarships, monetary incentives, socioeconomic status of family, affordability, and higher cost sensitivity	Pedro and Franco,2015; Chang and Chang, 2022; Huang et al, 2023; Li and Bray, 2007; Lee and Kuzhabekova,2018; Wiers-Jenssen, 2019; Woo and Wang, 2024; Entrich etl, 2024	The area of future research can examine longitudinal financial stress trajectories of international students across study stages.
Social and emotional	Informal social networks, physical distance from home country, family dynamics, social dynamics, status, curiosity, and perceived value,	Pedro and Franco, 2015; Morley et al., 2021; Pham and Bright, 2022; Lai et al, 2019; Pham and Lai, 2016; Zha et al, 2019	Future studies can examine mental health outcomes of international students across mobility stages.
Cultural factors	Dominance of English, communication styles, preconceived notions, and global mindset	Morley et al, 2021; Schäfer and Dal,2019; Lilley et al, 2015; Spencer-Oatey, 2013	Studies can analyze intercultural competence development trajectories for international students
Image of the institute and the role of agents	Reputation of the university, availability of a branch campus in the home country,	Pedro and Franco, 2015; Zhu and Zhang, 2024; Spencer-Oatey, 2013; Jacobs, 2022	Study the role of perceived inclusivity, sustainability, social media

	facilities available, and recruitment agencies		narratives on international student choice.
Regional patterns	Geographic trends, concentration in some countries, political situation in the home country, pull and push factors.	Shields, 2014; Barnett et al, 2016; Huang et al, 2023	Future studies can investigate how regional geopolitical shifts influence international student preferences and destinations.
Policy and equity	Student and work visa, government-supported expenditure, interconnectedness of domestic and international student policies, assurance, integration efforts, and issues of access, equity, decolonization, and social justice, inclusive internationalization policies.	Jacobs,2022; Tamrett and Teffera, 2021; Guo et al, 2022; Walker, 2014; Majee and Ress, 2018; Chao, 2014; Greek and Jonsmoen,2021; Van Mol and Perez Encinaz, 2022; Hill et al, 2019	Studies can analyze how poststudy work policies affect long-term migration patterns for international students.
Cluster 2: The Outcomes			
International Student experiences	Discriminative environment, isolation, language imperialism, safety, intercultural exchange, better academic knowledge and professional skills, and higher self-reported competency levels	Zhu and Zhang, 2024; Morley et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2022; Geek and Jonsmoen,2021; Lee et al., 2017; Nyamsuren et al., 2024; Amzat et al.,2023; Lin et al., 2025.	Future studies can investigate microlevel discrimination experiences and academic outcomes.

Money matters	socioeconomic disparity and unequal access, higher socioeconomic group, high switching cost, monetary benefit to institutes	Wiers-Jenssen and Støren,2021; Guo et al, 2022; Lai et al, 2019; Lörz et al, 2016; Amaro et al, 2024; De Witte and Soncin, 2021; Weber et al, 2024	Future studies can analyze financial coping strategies to handle socio economic disparity.
Hubs of mobility	Concentration in certain countries.	Shields, 2014; Jacobs, 2022; Chen and Lo, 2013.	The economic clustering effect of international student concentration.
Cluster 3: The Impact			
Analyzing impact through the lens of Environmental; sustainability	Associated environment cost due to greenhouse emissions and air travel, overloads of mobility, Use of digital technology, curriculum innovation, massive open online courses, virtual communities	Shields and Lu, 2023; McCowan, 2023; Rizvi, 2020; Ramaswamy et al., 2021; Ortiz-Marcos et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2023.	Future studies can highlight the role of technology and emerging practices such as COIL to curb the hazards to environment.
Analyzing the Economic Sustainability	Academic fees charged to international students in inward mobility are a source of income generation for universities. The added costs of accommodation, food, transport, books, technology, and leisure also contribute to the local economy.	Lo & Chang, 2022; Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021; Lee and Kuzhabekova,2018; Wiers-Jenssen, 2019; Woo and Wang, 2024; Entrich et al., 2024.	Studies can Study postgraduation return on investment across regions for international students.

Analyzing the Socio-Cultural Sustainability	Internationalization helps promote multiculturalism by fostering diversity in traditions, festivals, languages, habits, preferences, and food. This helps foster cultural awareness, sensitivity, and respect.	Nyamsuren et al., 2024; Pedro and Franco, 2015; Morley et al., 2021; Pham and Bright, 2022; Lai et al, 2019; Liu & Saad, 2025.	Future studies can focus on cultural diplomacy and community level integration outcomes for international students.

Cluster 1: Patterns and Influences on International Student Mobility

This cluster identifies the key inputs to the internationalization of higher education, characterized by patterns and influencing factors that impact international student mobility. These influences could be intrinsic factors (emotional, image perception) or extrinsic factors (economic, cultural, regional patterns, policy, and equity). The study of international student mobility reveals complex patterns and influences shaped by socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors across regions and countries.

Economic Factors

Economic development is closely linked to international student mobility patterns. Going abroad for education is perceived as improving family status and well-being (Pedro & Franco, 2015). Economic growth positively affects international student mobility, with increased gross enrollment ratios shifting some countries from an outbound orientation to an inbound orientation (Chang & Chang, 2022). Global and Asian mobility is governed by pull factors such as the destination country's economic development (Huang et al., 2023; Li & Bray, 2007; Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018). International students are likely to choose countries that offer scholarships or other monetary incentives to reduce per-student expenditure (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019; Woo & Wang, 2024). However, studies suggest that, even then, students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to go abroad, and socioeconomic status is dominant when preferences are selected (Entrich et al., 2024).

Social and Emotional Factors

Social and emotional factors play a critical role in shaping perceptions about mobility. Informal social networks and the consideration of relational factors were highlighted in studies as keys to creating a supportive environment for inbound international students (Pedro & Franco, 2015; Morley et al., 2021). Among other

factors, the option to move closer to parents influenced academics from Asia in their decision to choose Singapore as a destination. Family dynamics and the sociocultural landscape influenced the mobility of Vietnamese students. The difference between expectations and experience also directly and indirectly affects students' expectations (Pham & Bright, 2022; Lai et al., 2019; Pham & Lai, 2016). Social dynamics motivate upper- and middle-class families in China to send their children abroad (Zha et al., 2019).

Cultural factors

Culture also plays an important role in international student mobility decisions. Traditional gender roles, insecurity, instability, and the dominance of English or linguistic imperialism were described as barriers to mobility (Morley et al., 2021). Language was seen as a tool for power differentials between domestic and international students (Schäfer & Dal,2019; Liu & Saad, 2025). While English is dominant in many countries, Mandarin Chinese is the mainstream language in China. Educating students as global citizens was identified as an important cultural agenda for the internationalization of education (Lilley et al., 2015). Cultural differences and communication styles influence international education partnerships (Spencer-Oatey, 2013).

Image of the Institute and the role of agents

A university's reputation also influences international student mobility decisions (Pedro & Franco, 2015). The availability of international branch campuses in one's own country also affects the mobility of Indian students. Streamlined doctoral admissions enhanced the appeal of returning to their home country for Chinese students (Zhu & Zhang, 2024). Facilities available, visionary leadership, and collaborations among institutes were critical in forming perceptions of the institutions (Spencer-Oatey, 2013). Recruitment agents and Cram schools in China were found to play a significant role in shaping students' expectations and mobility decisions (Jacobs, 2022).

Regional patterns

International student mobility patterns are unevenly distributed. Europe, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Russia attract many international students (Shields, 2014). The USA was identified as the most central country for mobility (Barnett et al., 2016). The uncertain sociopolitical situation in Bangladesh was a reason for students to study abroad. Pull factors are important for outward mobility for Asians, but push factors dominate for intra-Asian mobility (Huang et al., 2023). According to the World Migration Report 2021, the United States was the first destination for students, followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and Canada (World Migration Report, 2024).

Policies and equity

Research has highlighted the importance of different policies and perceptions of equity in mobility. Migration policies, especially those related to international student and work visas and government-supported research and development expenditure, were found to impact international students' mobility decisions regarding destinations and areas of study (Jacobs, 2022). Although social inclusion has been promoted by multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, the papers in the group find limited mobility available only to a few stakeholders (Tamrett & Teffera, 2021). Guo et al. (2022) recommend dewesternizing internationalization to increase equity and access to mobility for more stakeholders. (Guo et al., 2022). Moreover, research on student mobility policies highlights the interconnectedness of domestic and international student policies and proposes a justice-oriented critique of more equitable practices (Walker, 2014). Studies recommend balancing internationalization, racial justice, mutual recognition of qualifications, and policies that promote better integration to foster positive teamwork and social cohesion (Majee & Ress, 2018; Chao, 2014; Greek & Jonsmoen, 2021). Campus programs designed to promote interactions between South Korean and international students had a positive effect. On the other hand, Van Mol and Perez Encinaz (2022) have recommended going beyond broadening activities to include internationalization in the curriculum (Van Mol & Perez Encinaz, 2022; Hill et al., 2019).

Cluster 2: Outcomes

The papers in the cluster explore the outcomes of international student mobility. They show interesting results, with some papers highlighting positive outcomes and some critical of mobility. The cluster is divided into the following themes: International Student Experiences, Money Matters, and Hubs of Mobility.

International Student Experiences

The negative experiences reported by international students were a discriminatory environment for students from low-income households, who faced issues such as outsider status, xenophobia, safety concerns, feelings of isolation, marginalization, and epistemic exclusion (Zhu & Zhang, 2024; Morley et al., 2018). Sociocultural issues were found to be important in shaping international student experiences, and immigrant students adopted different emotional strategies to assimilate into different cultures. The dominance of English was questioned, as it was thought to promote Western knowledge (Guo et al., 2022). Increased diversity due to internationalization was seen as a challenge to collaboration and to the preservation of national identity (Geek & Jonsmoen, 2021). Satisfaction with mobility was higher among Indian students than among Chinese or South Korean students. Additionally, compared with students from Europe or North America, Asian students reported more unfair treatment (Lee et al., 2017).

Money matters

The mobility reach was limited to higher socioeconomic groups (Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021). Mobility was identified as yet another way to spread socioeconomic disparity and unequal access (Guo et al., 2022). High switching costs prevented students from moving to another institution (Lai et al., 2019; Lörz et al., 2016). International students benefit from incoming institutions and are seen as generating income and promoting tourism (Amaro et al., 2024; De Witte & Soncin, 2021; Weber et al., 2024).

Hubs of mobility

Inbound mobility was dominated by certain European countries and the USA, resulting in talent clusters in hubs (Shields, 2014). On the other hand, internationalization was not a high priority and was seen only as a means of survival for less prestigious universities (Chen & Lo, 2013). Table 5 shows the top 5 countries with the most inbound international students.

Table 5: Top 5 countries with the most inbound students (Source: Institute of International Education, 2023)

Country Name, Year	Number of Inbound Students	Dominant countries for inward mobility	Number of Outbound Students	Dominant Countries for Outward Movement
USA (2023).	1,126,690	China, India, Brazil, South Korea, Vietnam, Nigeria.	2,86,716	The United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and Ireland. Students typically pursued education abroad briefly and returned to the USA to get degrees.
United Kingdom (2023).	7,18,085	China, India, Pakistan, and Nigeria.	31,075(data reported only till 2016*)	United States, Australia, and Ireland.

Canada (2023).	6,60,230	India, China, Philippines, Nigeria, Iran.	14,692	United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, France.
Australia (2023).	4,37,485	China, India, Nepal, Vietnam, Pakistan, Sri Lanka.	44,045(data reported only till 2016*)	United States, United Kingdom, Canada, China.
France (2023).	4,12,100	Morocco, Algeria, Italy, Spain, China.	1,44,548	United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, Romania.

*Outbound data for the United Kingdom and Australia are reported only up to 2016 because of source reporting limitations. These values illustrate magnitude rather than precise temporal equivalence. The table illustrates the relative scale and mobility patterns. The report published by UK International University shows the five-year summary (2017–2022) of outbound UK students as 113,355. A report by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skill and Employment for 2019 shows that the number of outbound students was 58,058.

The table shows that the U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, and France were the top 5 countries that received the most international students in terms of inward mobility in 2023, where engineering, science, business, and management were the most preferred fields. These countries have high levels of economic growth and development. These countries host numerous globally ranked universities, use English as the primary language of instruction, and offer clear pathways for employment and residency. They also benefit from strong internationalization policies, advanced infrastructure, and extensive global networks. As a result, they attract students from developing economies such as India, China, Nigeria, Brazil, Pakistan, and Vietnam. The table also shows that the outward movement from the top five countries was relatively low, and students tended to move within Europe, the U.S., and Canada. This highlights the inequity in mobility and underscores the need for developing economies to introspect and strategize to attract international students to their countries.

Cluster 3: Analyzing impact

Through the lens of sustainability

This cluster analysis paper examines mobility from a sustainability perspective and the internationalization of higher education. The United Nations defines sustainability as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. SDG 13 on climate action calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. The papers in this cluster question the benefits of mobility and its associated environmental costs, including greenhouse gas emissions and air travel (Shields & Lu, 2023; McCowan, 2023). These studies call for reimagining and reconceptualizing mobility beyond commercial terms (Rizvi, 2020). SDG 4 on quality education calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, as seen in the outcome cluster, many research papers question whether mobility is for all or the privileged few. Studies have highlighted the overload of mobility and have advocated incorporating SDGs into the internationalization of higher education (Ramaswamy et al., 2021; Ortiz-Marcos et al., 2020). Shields & Lu (2023) have recommended online education as an alternative for mobility (Shields & Lu, 2023). Digital technology, curriculum innovation, massive open online courses, and virtual communities are proposed alternatives for sustaining mobilization in higher education (Yue et al., 2023).

Economic Impact

Mobility and the internationalization of higher education have long-term impacts on the economic development of host and participating countries. Academic fees charged to international students in inward mobility are a source of funding and income generation for universities (Lo & Chang, 2022). The estimated revenue generated by international students is shown in Figure 2. The top 5 countries (as shown in Table 3) generate substantial revenues from inward mobility. The costs of accommodations, food, transport, books, technology, and leisure also add to the local economy (Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021). Countries that provide inbound students with work permits, residency, and citizenship help strengthen their competent workforce and skill base; thus, these students contribute to the job market and the local economy. For countries that send these students, mobility affects remittances and financial flows. Students who return can help fill critical skill gaps. However, it is equally important to note that the high cost of education can strain finances, widen income inequalities, and pose risks if the expected returns are not realized. Developing economies should consider these challenges and explore attracting foreign campuses to the country, establishing dual degree programs, establishing offshore campuses, and exploring National Scholarship Programs with Return Clauses.

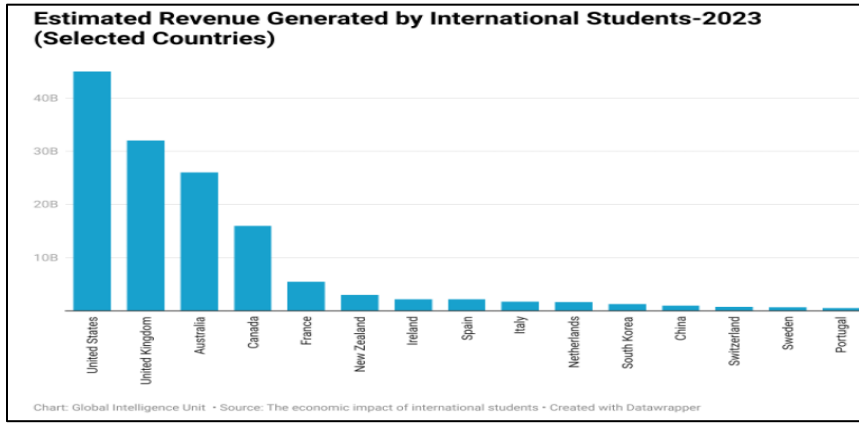

Figure 2: Estimated revenue generated by international students (Source: Global Education Report, 2023)

Socio-Cultural Impact

International student mobility helps promote multiculturalism by fostering diversity in traditions, festivals, languages, habits, preferences, and food. This helps foster cultural awareness, sensitivity, and respect. Diverse cultural exposure helps develop intercultural skills, enabling students to adapt to a global workforce (Nyamsuren et al., 2024). The cultural aspect often serves as a form of soft power for countries to leverage benefits. However, it is also vital to acknowledge the challenging impact of culture, such as culture shock and reverse culture shock, identity conflicts, and cultural homogenization. Policies, checks, and practices should be in place to ensure inclusive, culturally sensitive, and equitable education policies.

DISCUSSION

Various factors affect the physical mobility of international students. Studies argue that the high cost of physical mobility makes it a domain of the privileged few (Entrich et al.,2024). The country's migration policy also plays a key role in receiving inbound students; for example, new student enrollment in UK universities from the EU decreased by 53% from 2021–22 after the announcement of Brexit rules. The image of an institute, the facilities offered, and the leadership also play a decisive role in helping inbound students make decisions. On the other hand, the availability of a branch campus in the home country was also an emerging factor that influenced students' decisions to study abroad (Spencer-Oatey, 2013). Social and cultural factors, including informal networks, distance between the home country and the country of higher education, cultural similarity, and the dominance of English, also mattered to students (Pedro & Franco, 2015; Morley et al., 2021). A few countries dominate outbound and inbound mobility.

According to the World Migration Report, the countries that received the most students in 2021 were the USA, the UK, Australia, Germany, and Canada.

Figure 3 presents a hypothesized model based on the identified clusters and the discussions above.

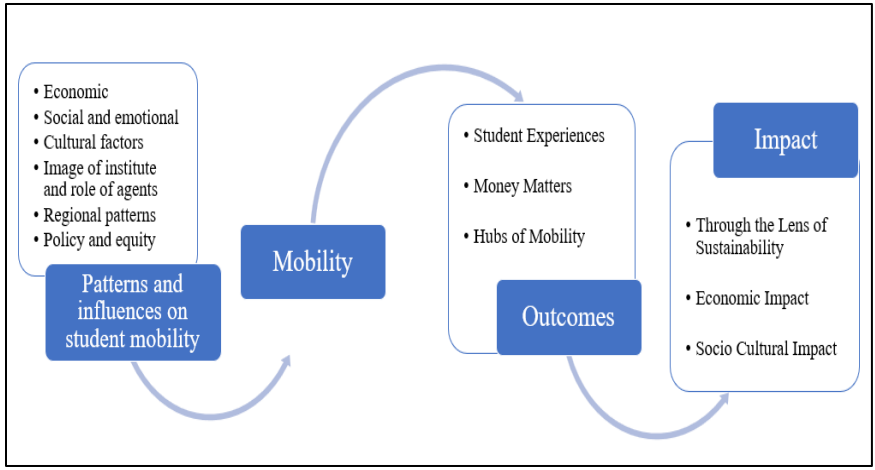

Figure 3: Impact-oriented hypothesized model on the mobility and internationalization of higher education (Source: Authors' Contribution)

Most outbound students were from Asia, with China and India leading. The concentration on specific countries was also noted in the papers selected for the study. Thirty-two papers had one or more European countries as the study center, and almost 37 papers evaluated mobility for one or more Asian countries. The researchers focused on the main inbound and outbound countries, with very little representation of Latin American or African countries. The motivation to go abroad for higher education was the desire to gain better knowledge, stronger professional skills, a good job, and a better life, but studies also reported isolation, racial discrimination, and safety concerns among students (Zhu & Zhang, 2024; Nyamsuren et al., 2024). The outcome also highlights how these outbound students are a source of income for countries and institutions. For example, according to the Government of Canada website, international students contributed USD 37.3 billion to the economy in 2022. All this leads to the question of the impact of physical mobility. The question also arises as to whether physical mobility contributes to the goals of the SDGs. Is it making education accessible to all? Other questions raised include greenhouse gas emissions and their environmental effects from air travel (Shields & Lu, 2023; Ortiz-Marcos et al., 2020). Studies also recommend exploring technology to bridge this gap through virtual exchange, collaborative online international learning, or internationalizing the curriculum (Yue, 2023). Emphasis has been placed on incorporating sustainability goals into curriculum design. Digital technologies are not immune to misuse, and they also require stringent policies at the global level.

Case Study Discussions: Illustrative extensions beyond the review

Collaborative online international learning (COIL) can be considered a sustainable alternative for internationalizing higher education. Through COIL, universities can collaborate on global projects linked to courses by leveraging technology without the need for travel. It eliminates the costs associated with travel, accommodations, and other miscellaneous costs. A study by Mendes & Peralta (2024) illustrated a COIL project between institutions in Brazil and Argentina; the results revealed that students appreciated the project's exposure and were motivated to pursue future collaborations. Aguilar-Cruz and Xiang (2023) examined a COIL project involving students from China and Colombia. This study demonstrated ways to address language barriers, improve intercultural communication, and develop students' intercultural competence. COIL can be an effective means of reducing inequity in internationalization, as it avoids the environmental hazards associated with travel. It also provides developing economies with equal and sustainable access to internationalization.

To gain economic benefits and increase their global presence, many universities have launched dual-degree programs and offshore campuses. In a dual degree program, by completing a specified number of years at each university, collaborating universities from different countries sign agreements that allow students to earn degrees from two or more partner universities. For example, in the dual degree program between the London School of Economics (LSE) and the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) in New York, students complete their first year at LSE and their second year at SIPA, earning a degree from both universities. Another example is Symbiosis International University, India, which offers a dual BBA program with Aston University, UK. Under offshoring, universities physically establish campuses or operations in a foreign country, such as New York University or Abu Dhabi, which is a part of NYU's global network of universities. Duke Kunshan University is a collaboration between Duke University, USA, and Wuhan University, China, established in Kunshan, Jiangsu, China.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the researchers attempted to achieve three objectives. To achieve the first objective, the researchers applied the PRISMA guidelines to identify 79 key papers on the mobility and internationalization of higher education. This synthesis helped clarify the key drivers, benefits, challenges, and barriers associated with student and academic mobility, thereby fulfilling the second objective of the study. On the basis of the literature, the researchers proposed a comprehensive framework (Input-Outcome-Impact) that outlined the research journey thus far and provided a roadmap for future research to enhance internationalization strategies in an equitable and sustainable manner. In simple terms, physical mobility is the physical movement of students and staff across borders for education and research. Among the 79 papers examined in detail, 22 included quantitative analysis, 29 used a qualitative approach through interviews,

and 28 employed a balanced analysis based on secondary data, literature, and policy documents. The distinct clusters identified were Patterns and influences on student mobility, Outcomes, and Analyzing impact through the lens of sustainability. The cluster titled Patterns and Influences on Student Mobility had subclusters: Economic, Social, Emotional, Cultural Factors, Regional Patterns, Image of Institute, Role of Agents, Policies, and Equity. The outcome cluster had three subclusters: student experiences, money matters, and mobility hubs. The authors developed a conceptual model based on these key ideas to understand the influences and patterns that affect physical mobility and its outcomes and to critically examine physical mobility through the lens of sustainability, economic impact, and sociocultural impact. This systematic literature review addresses the gap identified by Buckner and Stein (2020) by framing sustainability in international student mobility as an issue of justice.

Implications

Theoretical Implications: This study has streamlined the literature on mobility and the internationalization of higher education using the PRISMA approach, thereby advancing theory building. This study has identified three predominant clusters that help synthesize the literature and provide pathways for future researchers to contribute. The hypothesized model of the impact-oriented hypothesized model on the mobility and internationalization of higher education is another unique contribution of the study, providing a new framework for researchers. The model integrates the patterns and influences on student mobility, outcomes, and long-term impact. Mobility has always been viewed as a crucial aspect of internationalization. The case discussion in the study outlines the importance of embracing alternatives such as COIL and MOOCs as sustainable solutions that ensure that students do not miss out on opportunities to participate in internationalization. By exploring solutions for dual degrees and offshoring, as discussed in cluster 3, the model can improve the economic impact for developing economies, thereby enhancing internationalization practices for students. The results and discussion of the study make substantial contributions to the internationalization, higher education, and sustainable education literature.

Managerial Implications: This study has implications for academicians, researchers, policymakers, international offices, and decision makers. Cluster 1 highlights the need for scholarships and monetary incentives to encourage international students from developing and low-income countries and to provide them with access. Cluster 2 urges the need for policies and equity mechanisms to expand participation, helping international students cope with isolation, language imperialism, safety concerns, and ethical recruitment practices. The COIL, dual degree, and offshoring case discussions from cluster 3 can provide insights for formulating future policies. Policies on COIL can reduce inequities in access to internationalization, benefiting developing economies. Developed economies can collaborate with developing economies through dual degree programs for mutual benefits. By understanding the factors that influence mobility, institutions can

design mobility programs that cater to the needs of students and developing economies. International offices can identify trends and priority regions for collaboration on the basis of mobility trends; the office can also examine funding models, scholarships, and work permits to increase inbound mobility.

Societal Implications: This study emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and the development of intercultural competence to foster global citizenship. The synthesis of mobility trends has implications for building transnational networks of trust and a country's soft power. The model discusses sustainable internationalization as a long-term impact and leverages technology through COIL to reduce the negative environmental impact associated with mobility. This has implications for sustainable development.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The researchers have done their best to provide a comprehensive framework for mobility and the internationalization of higher education. However, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. This study combines searches across both Scopus and Web of Science; as a result, some unique articles may have been missed. The decision to focus on the top 10 journals was made to ensure a high-quality, coherent body of literature, drawing on well-established, peer-reviewed sources widely recognized in the field. Moreover, the researchers acknowledge that this criterion may have led to the exclusion of potentially relevant research published in other journals, thereby limiting the breadth of coverage. Future research could expand its scope to include a wider range of sources, providing a more comprehensive perspective. Future studies could also focus on specific countries and compare practices. Studies could also analyze the role of the government in the internationalization of higher education. The hypothesized model can be further validated through data collection and statistical analysis.

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Author bios

Anushka Sinha is a student at the Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies-Pune. She is highly interested in research and higher education practices. Email ID: anushkasinha.2024@associate.scmspune.ac.in

Adya Sharma, a dedicated professional with more than 20 years of experience, is a PhD, NET-qualified, double postgraduate, and an alumnus of St. Stephen's College. She brings with her rich practical experience from the corporate world that perfectly blends with theory and enhances academics. She has also been

connected to the industry as a corporate trainer. An avid researcher, she has many case studies on her credit, which are based on real-time events. She has also written research papers in reputed journals, including Scopus-indexed journals, and has authored chapters in books. She institutionalized COIL in the institute and is responsible for many successful COIL collaborations with universities in Germany, Brazil, and the United States of America. She was also a resource person for a faculty training workshop to empower faculty to design COIL modules. Email id: adyaindia@gmail.com; orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7040-0278

Nehajoan Panackal is an Associate Professor with the Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies, Pune. Her research interests are in the areas of sustainability, human resource management, technology in education, and business administration, which have been translated into publications in Scopus-indexed and ABDC-listed journals. She has been a member of multiple COIL projects with institutes in Brazil and the United States of America. She was also a resource person for a faculty training workshop to empower faculty to design COIL modules.Nehajoan.panackal@scmspune.ac.in.orcid: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9552-6763