

International Student Mobility: Advancing the Internationalisation of Higher Education through a Systematic Review

Sana Khanam^a

Rakesh Mohan Joshi^a

^aIndian Institute of Foreign Trade, Delhi

sana_phdmf19@iift.edu

rakeshmohanjosshi@iift.edu

B-21, NRPC colony, Qutub Institutional Area, New Delhi, 110016

ABSTRACT

International student mobility (ISM) has become a critical aspect of global education systems and a significant driver of economic and cultural exchange. Over the past two decades, academic interest in ISM research has grown significantly. Despite its importance, there has been a lack of comprehensive framework-based reviews addressing the growing body of research. This study employs the Theory-Context-Methods (TCM) framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dominant theories, contexts (countries), and methods (research approaches and analysis techniques) in ISM research over the last ten years (2015–2024). Through a trend analysis of two distinct periods, 2016–2019 and 2020–2024, the review highlights shifts in research focus, offering a dynamic perspective on ISM scholarship. Furthermore, the review elucidates the evolving nature of ISM research, uncovers underexplored areas, and provides insightful directions for future research. The study emphasizes the economic implications of ISM, highlighting its role in driving tuition revenue, fostering trade and investment opportunities, and addressing skill shortages in host countries. By advancing the understanding of ISM, this study contributes to the literature on the internationalization of higher education and offers valuable insights for policymakers, academics, and practitioners aiming to better manage and promote ISM.

Keywords: International Student Mobility, TCM Framework, Systematic Literature Review, Economic Impact

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the demand for international higher education has grown significantly, driving increased attention to international student mobility (ISM) (Ahmad, 2015; Foster, 2014). ISM has emerged as the second most prominent area of research within the broader field of higher education internationalization, following "internationalization at home" (Yemini & Sagie, 2016). In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, governments and higher education institutions have promoted ISM as a vital means of fostering students' cultural awareness and competence (Kokko, 2011; Bohman & Borglin, 2014; Winslade, 2016).

UNESCO (2006) defines "internationally mobile students" as individuals who cross national borders specifically to pursue education. Outbound mobile students grew from 1.9 million in 1997 to 6.6 million in 2020, reflecting the younger generation's growing curiosity and desire for international learning experiences (UNESCO, 2024). Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) predicts that international student mobility could reach 8 million students by 2025, driven by global demographic changes (University of Oxford, 2015).

In response to the rapidly expanding body of research in this domain, systematic reviews of ISM literature have also grown in number in recent years. Many of these reviews employ bibliometric and content analysis approaches to synthesize research on specific aspects of international student mobility, such as cultural adaptation, educational experiences, mental or psychological well-being,

and perceived advantages. Examples of such reviews can be found in various studies, e.g., Abdullah et al. (2014); Gümüş et al. (2020); Kelleher (2013); Lillyman & Bennett (2014); Nicolescu & Galalae (2013); Zhang & Goodson (2011). However, these reviews often focus on narrowly defined areas of ISM and lack a comprehensive, framework-based systematic analysis of the literature.

Addressing this gap, our study conducts a framework-based systematic review of ISM research over the past decade (2015–2024). The review aims to provide a holistic understanding of the current state of ISM research and its gaps (Breslin & Gatrell, 2023). Specifically, we focus on recent studies that reflect the field's expansion across diverse dimensions. To achieve this, our analysis is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How has research on ISM evolved over the past decade in terms of publication trends, journal contributions, and thematic focus?

RQ2: Which theoretical perspectives, contextual dimensions, and methodological approaches dominate the literature on ISM?

RQ3: What are the emerging issues and future research directions in ISM literature?

To address these questions, we investigate ISM literature through the lens of pre-course and during-course experiences, offering a comprehensive perspective on the field over a defined time frame. This review contributes to advancing the field in several ways: it synthesizes recent publications, maps the theoretical, contextual, and methodological dimensions, and identifies critical gaps and opportunities for future research.

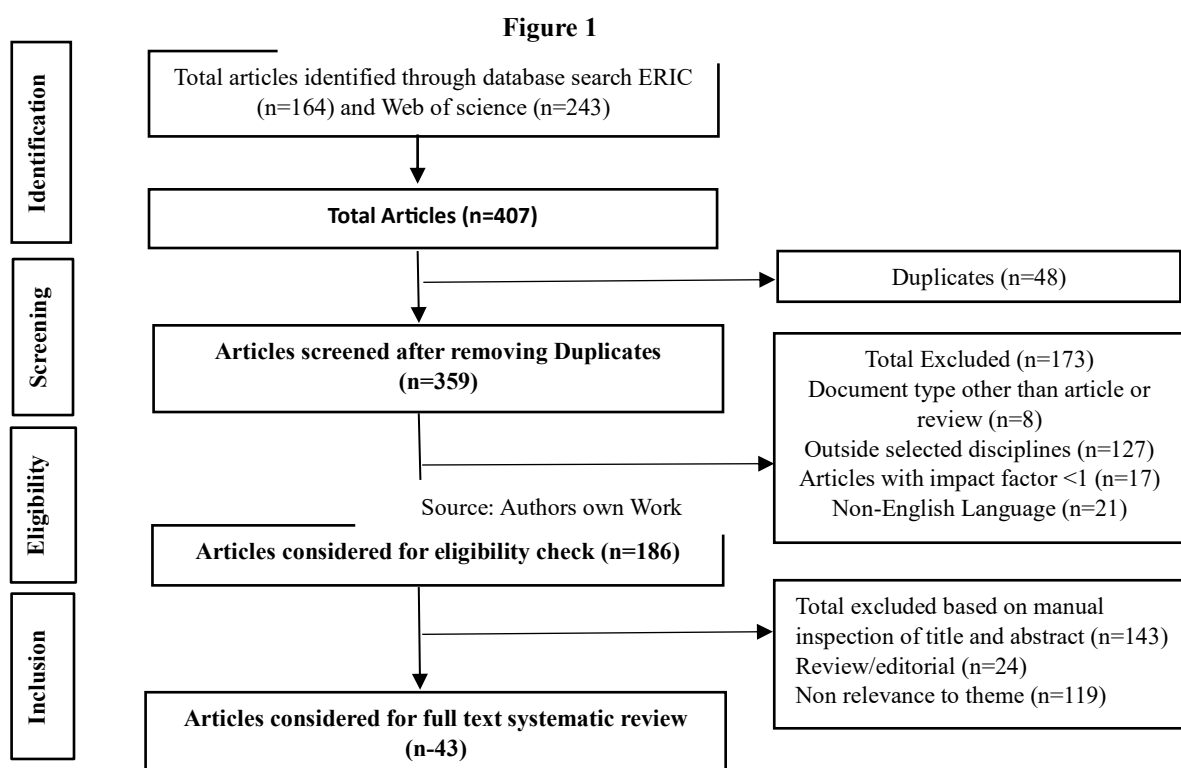
The layout of this paper is structured as follows: we commence by presenting the research methodology adopted for the current study. Next, we present findings by discussing the development of ISM literature and present state of knowledge using the Theory, Context, and Methods (TCM) framework. Then followed by future research avenues. Finally, we conclude with implication and conclusion.

2. Methodology

A comprehensive review was undertaken to identify and understand recurring trends and patterns in the literature on international student mobility. This review employs a domain-based theories, methods, and context (TMC) framework approach as proposed by (Lim et al., 2021). The study employed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009), which comprises a 27-item checklist and flow diagram for selecting articles, thus ensuring a transparent and reproducible methodology. As the field of international student mobility research expands rapidly, systematic literature reviews (SLR) serve to scientifically consolidate and summarise existing literature, providing a contemporary understanding of the phenomenon and monitoring findings within the domain (Palmatier et al., 2018). For this review, the initial search was conducted using two databases: the Web of Science (WOS) and ERIC. The WOS database was chosen for its comprehensive collection of peer-reviewed research (Li et al., 2010), while ERIC was selected due to its wide-ranging coverage of publications in the field of education. The analysis focused on the period from 2015 to 2024, as research on international student mobility gained significant momentum after 2010, following 14 years of gradual development since 1996 (Yemini & Sagie, 2016). This timeframe aims to provide a detailed overview of the significance and evolving trends within the international student mobility phenomenon. During the identification stage, the authors employed keywords like "international student mobility," "student mobility," "transnational student mobility," and "study abroad," utilizing BOOLEAN operators such as "AND," "OR," and "NOT."

The study selection process for this review adhered to specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Peer-reviewed articles published from 2015 to 2024 (inclusive) were considered, given the rigorous evaluation these publications undergo. Due to the authors' linguistic capabilities, only English-language articles were included. Additionally, journals with an impact factor greater than one were selected (Paul et al., 2021). The review focused on relevant fields such as education, economics, sociology, and social sciences. A methodical examination of titles and abstracts was conducted to ensure topical relevance. The review excluded editorials, conference papers, books, and literature reviews, instead concentrating on conceptual and empirical research papers.

Utilizing the PRISMA methodology, we gathered 407 articles in total: 243 from WOS and 164 from ERIC. We eliminated 48 duplicate entries. Based on the aforementioned inclusion and exclusion criteria, 173 articles were eliminated during the screening stage. In the eligibility assessment, we manually examined titles and abstracts, excluding 143 articles that were irrelevant to our research objective or of unsuitable article types. The remaining 43 articles underwent full-text systematic review and were coded for subsequent content analysis. In line with the guidance provided by (Herjanto et al., 2020), we employed at least two domain experts to independently code each article, thereby enhancing the credibility of our content analysis methodology. The systematic approach utilized in this research, following the PRISMA protocol, is depicted in Figure 1.

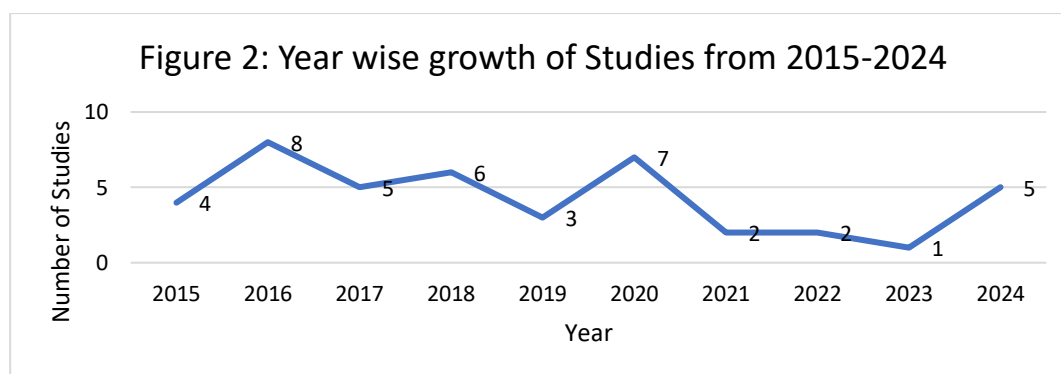


3. Findings And Discussion

Publication Trend

This study revealed that 20% (8 studies) of the publications occurred in 2016, marking the peak year in terms of academic interest, with 2020 accounting for 16% (7 studies), representing the second highest. Notably, the period from 2021 to 2023 witnessed a decline, with only 2 studies published in 2021 and a further decrease to 1 in 2023 (see Fig. 2). However, a resurgence was observed in 2024, with the number of studies increasing to 5. Several potential factors may elucidate these trends:

- There was a heightened focus on international student mobility in 2016 due to global policy shifts that encouraged cross-border education.
- The second-highest peak in ISM literature in 2020 can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to significant disruptions in ISM, prompting a wave of research focused on its long-term impacts, as well as digital transformation and online education studies. This surge in interest likely contributed to a higher number of studies during this period.
- Renewed interest in 2024 driven by the recovery of international student mobility post-pandemic and increased research funding.
- Emerging concerns regarding inclusivity, accessibility, and digital transformations in student mobility, prompting new academic inquiry.



Journal Contribution

Source: Authors own Work

Research on international student mobility (ISM) is shaped by various journals in higher education and interdisciplinary fields. “Studies in Higher Education” is the most influential, contributing 17 papers, underscoring its key role in ISM research. Other notable journals include Higher Education, with 7 papers, and Higher Education Quarterly, with 5 papers, emphasizing ISM's importance in higher education studies. Additionally, “the Journal of Studies in International Education,” “International Journal of Educational Development,” “Sustainability,” and “Journal of Marketing for Higher Education” each contributed one paper, indicating ISM's interdisciplinary appeal (see Table I).

This distribution highlights that ISM is not only a core focus in higher education studies but also a topic of interest in broader areas such as sustainability, marketing, and educational policy. The diverse journal representation underscores the multifaceted nature of ISM research, which spans academic, policy-oriented, and industry-relevant perspectives.

Table I: Journal Contribution

Journal	Number of Papers	Journal	Number of Papers
Studies In Higher Education	17	Sage Open	1
Higher Education	7	Asian Population Studies	1
Higher Education Quarterly	5	Higher Education Policy	1
Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management	4	Sustainability	1
Industry and Higher Education	2	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	1

Journal of Studies in International Education	1	International Journal of Educational Management	1
International Journal of Educational Development	1		

Source: Authors own Work

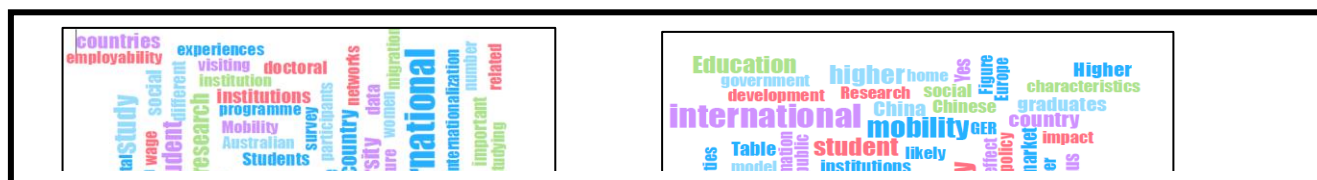
The Landscape of International Student Mobility Literature (Trend Analysis for 2015–2019 and 2020–2024)

Following the approach recommended by Yun, Lee, and Kim (2019), we employed word-cloud analysis to illustrate the chronological trends and commonly occurring keywords in research on international student mobility. This analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software, analyzing the distribution of articles on a year-by-year basis (Refer to Fig. 3).

A word cloud analysis of international student mobility (ISM) literature from 2015 to 2019 highlights "*students*," "*international mobility*," and "*education*" as primary keywords, underscoring themes of higher education and the global student movement. Frequently mentioned terms include "*universities*," "*countries*," "*higher education*," and "*host country*," highlighting the roles of institutions and host nations in mobility trends. Key areas of interest such as "*cultural factors*," "*economic opportunities*," and "*employability*" suggest that cultural alignment, career prospects, and economic considerations drive mobility decisions. Geographic terms like "*China*," "*Malaysia*," and "*Asia*" indicate regional interests in mobility patterns. Additionally, terms like "*government policies*," "*language*," and "*academic experiences*" point to institutional and systemic factors influencing ISM.

The 2020–2024 period continues to emphasize "*students*," "*international mobility*," and "*education*" while introducing new keywords such as "*COVID*," "*recruitment*," and "*online learning*," reflecting the pandemic's impact and the rise of virtual education platforms. The analysis shows an increased focus on "*social mobility*," "*labor markets*," and "*employment outcomes*," indicating a shift towards understanding ISM in the context of global economic recovery and job market dynamics. Terms like "*policies*," "*characteristics*," and "*government*" suggest more research into policy frameworks affecting mobility during and after the pandemic. The geographic focus remains strong with "*China*," "*Europe*," "*Canada*," and "*Africa*," indicating broader regional diversification in ISM studies. Other significant additions include cultural experiences, participation ratio, and recruitment strategies, underscoring the importance of equitable access, inclusivity, and institutional efforts to attract international students.

Figure 3: Trend Analysis of ISM



Source: Authors own Work

Theories, Context, and Methods Framework-based Review: The discussion of T (theory), C (context), and M (types of data, Analyses methods) components is presented below.

Theory: Various theories have been employed to examine international student mobility, reflecting the multifaceted nature of this research area. Behavioral and decision-making frameworks, such as the Push-Pull Model and Human Capital Theory, dominate the literature, with 8 and 5 studies,

respectively, emphasizing their widespread applicability. The Push-Pull Model is widely recognised for its effectiveness in elucidating the elements that shape students' choices regarding overseas study. This model strikes a balance between the "push" elements in the student's native country, such as limited opportunities, and the "pull" elements in the destination country, like superior educational quality (Lee, 1996). Its popularity stems from its ability to provide a comprehensive explanation of these influencing factors. Similarly, Human Capital Theory is frequently applied to understand how education abroad is perceived as an investment in skills and future earnings (Becker, 1994). These theories are robust in explaining motivations but often overlook the complex sociocultural dimensions of mobility (see Table II).

Theoretical diversity in ISM studies is evident but underutilized. For instance, Signalling Theory (3 studies) provides insights into how international education signals employability to the labor market, while Neo-liberalism Theory (2 studies) critiques the commodification of education. Other frameworks, such as Social Capital Theory, Bourdieu's Habitus Model, and Ecological Systems Theory, are employed infrequently (1 study each). Yet, they offer valuable perspectives on the role of social structures, networks, and contextual influences on mobility decisions. Notably, critical perspectives like Blame-the-Student Theory and Social Reproduction Theory (1 study each) remain marginal in the literature despite their potential to address systemic inequalities in access to international education. This distribution of theoretical frameworks highlights a gap in the integration of underutilized theories that could provide richer, multidimensional explanations of ISM phenomena. Additionally, there is limited comparative analysis between widely applied models (e.g., Push-Pull, Human Capital) and less explored theories (e.g., Structuration Approach, Segmentation Theory), which could deepen our understanding of how economic, cultural, and policy factors intersect to shape mobility trends.

Table II: Theoretical Contribution

Theory	No. of Publications	References	Theory	No. of Publications	References
Push Pull Model	8	Owusu-Kwarteng, (2021); Cheung & Xu, (2015); Ahmad & Hussain, (2015); Ahmad & Buchanan, (2017); Lyu & Huang, (2024); Koh & Yeoh, (2024); Kosmaczewska, (2020); Gbollie & Gong, (2019)	Agency in Mobility	1	Xu, (2024)
Human Capital Theory	5	Cao et al., (2016); Kratz & Netz, (2016); Pinto, (2020); Cameron et al., (2019); (Lo et al., 2022).	Segmentation Theory	1	Kratz & Netz (2016)
Signalling Theory	3	Kratz & Netz (2016); Hsin Lo et al. (2022); Wiers-Jenssen & Støren (2020)	Ecological Systems Theory	1	Gbadamosi (2018)

Neo-liberalism Theory	2	Wen et al (2017); Urbanovič et al. (2016);	Bourdieu Habitus Model	1	Tran & Vu (2018)
Soft Power Theory	1	Tian & Cai Liu (2020)	Social Reproduction Theory	1	Hurst (2019)
Giddens' 'Structuration Approach	1	Kwarteng (2020)	Blame-the-student theory	1	Nada & Araújo (2018)
Development State Theory	1	Wen et al. (2017);	Network theory	1	Pedro & Franco (2016)
Social Demand Theory	1	Bryła (2018)	Social Capital Theory	1	Georgiana Mihut (2024)
Supply Side Theory	1	Bryła (2018)	Job Search Theory	1	Kratz & Netz (2016)
Migration Theory	1	Kratz & Netz (2016)			

Source: Authors own Work

Context: Our review reveals that studies on international student mobility are predominantly concentrated in Europe and Asia, collectively accounting for 78% of the research. Specifically, Europe dominates with 51% (25 studies), followed by Asia at 27% (13 studies). Comparatively, regions like North America (12%), Australia (4%), and Africa (4%) are underrepresented, with only a handful of studies conducted in these areas.

The prevalence of European studies can be attributed to Europe's active participation in student mobility programs like Erasmus+ and the Bologna Process, which enhance cross-border academic collaboration (refer Table III). Countries such as Portugal (4 studies), the UK (5 studies), and Germany (2 studies) have been focal points, likely due to their diverse international student populations and established higher education systems. Similarly, China (8 studies) in Asia has gained scholarly attention, reflecting its dual role as a top destination and source for international students. Despite North America's significant role in global student mobility, the region represents only 12% of the studies, with the USA (3 studies) and Canada (3 studies) being the primary contributors. This suggests a need for more research on student mobility trends in this region, especially given the USA's status as a leading international education hub. Africa and Australia are the least studied regions, with just 2 studies each. Africa's limited focus could stem from challenges like economic disparities and a smaller international student presence. Similarly, Australia's limited representation is surprising given its global reputation as a top destination for international students, indicating a potential gap in the literature.

Table III: Context

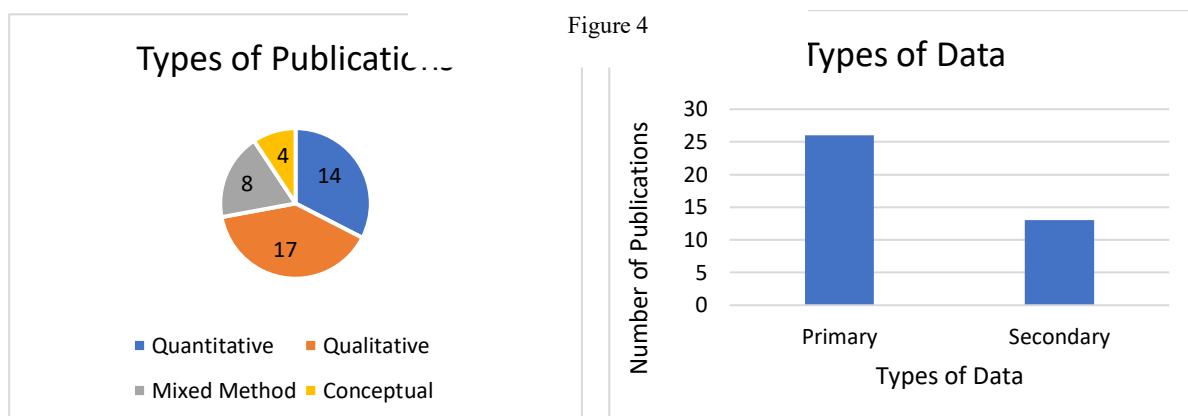
Country	Number of Studies	References	Country	Number of Studies	References
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China	8	(Jones, 2017); (Koh & Yeoh, 2024); (Tian & Liu, 2020); (Cao, 2016); (Shen, 2018); (Mok et al., 2018); (Shen et al., 2016); (Cheung & Xu, 2015) (2015)	Australia	2	(Cameron et al., 2019); (Tran & Vu, 2018)
UK	5	(Owusu-Kwarteng, 2020); (Mattern, 2016); (Gbadamosi, 2018); (Jones, 2017); (d'Hombres & Schnepf, 2021)	Norway	2	(Wiers-Jenssen & Støren, 2021); (Mihut, 2024)
Portugal	4	(Branco Oliveira & Soares, 2016); (Pedro & Franco, 2016); (Nada & Araújo, 2019); (Kosmaczewska, 2020)	UAE	1	(Ahmad & Hussain, 2015)
Canada	3	(Guo & Guo, 2017); (James, 2022); (Buckner et al., 2021)	Spain	1	(Pinto, 2020)
Malaysia	2	(Ahmad & Buchanan, 2015); (Koh & Yeoh, 2024)	Taiwan	1	(Lo et al., 2022)
USA	3	(Choudaha, 2017); (Hurst, 2019); (Buckner et al., 2021)	Netherland	1	(Van Mol & Perez-Encinas, 2022)
Poland	2	(Bryła, 2018); (Kosmaczewska, 2020)	Italy	1	(d'Hombres & Schnepf, 2021)
Lithuania	2	(Urbanovič et al., 2016); (Mihut, 2024)	Greece	1	(Mihut, 2024)
Germany	2	(Mihut, 2024); (Kratz & Netz, 2016)	Malta	1	(Mihut, 2024)
Africa	2	(Xu, 2024); (Gbollie & Gong, 2019)	Austria	1	(Mihut, 2024)
Czech Republic	1	(Mihut, 2024)	Global	1	(Perez-Encinas et al., 2020)
Croatia	1	(Mihut, 2024)			

Note: Few studies are conducted in multiple context

Source: Authors own Work

Methods: Among 39 published empirical studies, 14 used a quantitative methodology, whereas 17 used qualitative methods. The 8 studies out of 39 studies adopted mixed-method, where qualitative and quantitative methods were used simultaneously. In Quantitative studies (36%), the most administered data collection process is through a questionnaire survey, and few of the studies used databases (3) and previous national surveys (3). In contrast, in qualitative studies (44%), the most used data collection process is the face-to-face interview method (ten articles), reports (four articles), and two studies used previous literature (see Table IV). Among 39 studies, 29 used primary data, and 13 used secondary data for analysis (see Figure 4).



Quantitative studies employed various statistical methods, including regression analysis (6 studies) being the most frequently utilized, followed by logistic regression (3 studies) and descriptive analysis (2 studies). Additional analytical methods included multivariate analysis, cluster analysis, and propensity score matching. In contrast, qualitative studies utilized thematic analysis (6 studies), content analysis (5 studies), narrative analysis (2 studies), and probabilistic topic modeling (1 study). Mixed-method studies employed combinations of analytical techniques, such as descriptive analysis and thematic analysis or correlation analysis and content analysis (see Table V).

Source: Authors own Work

Table IV: Data Collection Method

Quantitative	References	Qualitative	References	Mixed Method	References
Questionnaire Survey	Bryła (2018); Cameron et al. (2019); Cao (2016); Ahmad & Hussain (2015); Hurst (2019); Pedro & Franco (2016); Mihut (2024); Kosmaczewska (2020)	Interview	Xu (2024); Oliveira & Soares (2016); Owusu-Kwarteng (2020); Urbanovič et al. (2016); Gbadamosi (2018); Oliveira & Soares (2016); Tran & Vu (2018); Nada & Araújo (2018); James (2022); Tian & Liu (2020)	Survey and Interviews	Gbollie and Gong (2019); Ahmad & Buchanan (2015); Cheung & Xu (2015); Mok et al. (2018); Shen (2018); Delfina Mattern (2016), Wen et al. (2017); Ahmad & Buchanan (2015)
Previous National Survey Data	Pinto (2020); Jenssen & Støren (2020); Mol et al. (2020)	Reports	Encinas et al. (2020); Guo & Guo (2017); Buckner (2021); Kratz & Netz (2016)		

Database	Lyu and Huang (2024); Lo et al. (2022); Hombres and Schnep (2021)	Previous Literature Analysis	Shen et al. (2016); Jones (2017)		
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Source: Authors own Work

Table V: Analysis Methods

Quantitative Analysis Method	References	Qualitative Analysis Method	References	Mixed method studies Analysis Methods	References
Regression Analysis	Bryła (2018); Pinto (2020); Pedro & Franco (2016); Lyu and Huang (2024); Cao (2016); Hurst (2019)	Thematic Analysis	Xu (2024); Kwarteng (2020); Urbanovič et al. (2016); Gbadamosi (2018); Guo & Guo (2017); Tian & Liu (2020)	Descriptive Analysis and Thematic Analysis	Ahmad & Buchanan (2015); Wen et al. (2017)
Logistic Regression	Mihut (2024); Wiers-Jensen & Støren (2020); Mol et al. (2020)	Content Analysis	Oliveira & Soares (2016); Tran & Vu (2018); Shen et al. (2016); James (2020)	Descriptive Analysis and Content Analysis	Mattern (2016); Mok et al. (2018)
Descriptive Statistics	Bryła (2018); Cameron et al. (2019);	Narrative analysis	Shen (2018); Nada & Araújo (2018)	Correlation Analysis, Content Analysis	Gbolliie and Gong (2019)
Multivariate analysis	Kratz & Netz (2016)	Probabilistic Topic Modeling	Encinas et al. (2020)	Regression Analysis and Thematic Analysis	Cheung & Xu (2015)
Analytical Hierarchy Process	Ahmad & hussain (2015)			Univariate Analysis, Thematic analysis	Ahmad & Buchanan (2015)
Time Series Analysis	Lo et al. (2022)			Descriptive Analysis and Comparative Analysis	Buckner (2021)
Cluster Analysis	Kosmaczewska (2020)				

Propensity score matching	Hombres and Schnep (2021)				
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Source: Authors own Work

4. Future Research Avenues

The systematic reviews we conducted on this subject reveal areas that have not yet been explored and highlight potential avenues for future investigation. These are outlined in the following section.

Future Directions: Theory

There exists a necessity for studies that integrate multiple theoretical frameworks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of international student mobility (ISM). For instance, combining the Push-Pull Model with Social Capital Theory or Network Theory could offer nuanced insights into the interaction between personal networks and economic incentives in shaping mobility decisions. The underutilized theories such as Ecological Systems Theory, Social Reproduction Theory, and Neo-liberalism Theory could provide alternative perspectives. Future research should investigate the influence of broader systemic and structural forces, including socio-political contexts, on mobility patterns. Additionally, future research could apply regionally relevant theories to enhance the understanding of ISM trends in specific cultural or geographic contexts. For example, the Development State Theory might be more applicable in analyzing ISM patterns in countries with strong state-led education policies, such as East Asia.

Future Directions: Context

Future studies should focus on underexplored regions like Africa and Oceania and less studied countries like UAE, Taiwan, and smaller European nations (e.g., Malta, Lithuania) to identify unique challenges, opportunities, and innovative practices in international student mobility. Adopting cross-regional or global perspectives, conducting longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, and fostering collaboration between marketing, policy, and educational disciplines could provide a more comprehensive understanding of global mobility patterns, evolving trends, and the intersections of marketing strategies, cultural factors, and economic impacts.

Future Directions: Methods

Methodological imbalances have been observed in international student mobility literature, particularly underutilizing advanced and emerging analytical techniques in ISM research. Future studies should diversify their methodological and analytical approaches, integrating methods such as longitudinal analysis, Bayesian modeling, and experimental approaches to enhance the robustness of findings. Additionally, given the predominance of primary data collection, further exploration of underutilized secondary data sources, such as cross-national databases, could provide more comprehensive insights into the global dynamics of ISM. Mixed-method studies remain underutilized in ISM research. Future work should integrate qualitative and quantitative methods more comprehensively, such as combining large-scale survey data with in-depth interviews or ethnographic studies. This approach would provide a more holistic understanding of students' lived experiences and institutional practices in different cultural and geographical contexts.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Our comprehensive review examined 43 articles through the TCM framework and conducted a trend analysis of ISM literature spanning 2015-2019 and 2020-2024. The analysis reveals a continuous growth in ISM literature research from 2015 to 2024. It also highlights that the 2015-

2019 period focused more on conventional factors such as cultural aspects, academic experiences, and employability. In contrast, the subsequent period witnessed the emergence of topics related to digital transformation, online education, and adaptive policies. Regarding theoretical foundations, decision-making and behavioral theories, particularly push and pull theory and human capital theory, were most frequently used to explain this phenomenon. Most reviewed studies collected data through interviews and questionnaire surveys, employing regression analysis and thematic analysis for data interpretation. The European continent served as the primary context for most research. Lastly, our TCM framework identifies, presents, and suggests future research gaps and directions.

Our systematic review offers several significant theoretical and practical contributions. First, for academia, it provides a comprehensive overview of international student mobility (ISM) literature, including publication trends, influential journals, and a comparative analysis of ISM research across 2016–2019 and 2020–2024. Secondly, we provide theoretical, contextual, and methodological insights grounded in a TCM framework. Lastly, drawing from our framework, we propose recommendations and directions for future research.

Practically, the study has implications for HEIs, policymakers, and economies. HEIs in underrepresented regions, such as Africa and Australia, can use these findings to strengthen their global presence by enhancing cross-border academic programs and offering competitive scholarships to attract international students. Policymakers should address systemic inequalities by reducing barriers to international education for disadvantaged students through scholarships, government funding, and public-private partnerships.

For economic development, ISM findings underscore Europe's success with initiatives like Erasmus+ as a model for economic diplomacy. Governments in underrepresented regions should invest in similar programs to foster international economic ties and create trade and investment opportunities. HEIs can also boost revenue by targeting growing student mobility from Asia and Africa and reinvesting tuition income into research, facilities, and community development. Host countries, such as the USA, UK, and Canada, can align ISM policies with labor market needs by offering post-study work opportunities, addressing skill shortages, and enhancing economic competitiveness.

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