AIRC SERIES: VOLUME 2

INNOVATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL ENROLLMENT: Global Strategies for Higher Education Growth

Edited by

CLAY HARMON AND KRISHNA BISTA

AIRC The Association of International Enrollment Management

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The *AIRC Series on Enrollment Management* provides a timely and authoritative resource for understanding the challenges and opportunities of international student recruitment and enrollment in higher education. Edited by Clay Harmon, Executive Director of the Association of International Enrollment Management (AIRC), the series brings together diverse voices—scholars, practitioners, and policy leaders—to address pressing questions of ethics, access, and sustainability in global student mobility.

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Innovations in International Student Enrollment

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Contents

Introduction: Framing the Future of International Student Enrollment

Clay Harmon
AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management

Krishna Bista
STAR Scholars Network: Society of Transnational Academic Researchers

International student enrollment has become one of the defining features of global higher education in the twenty-first century. At a time when demographic shifts, technological change, and political uncertainty converge, institutions are compelled to rethink how they attract, engage, and support learners from across the world. This volume responds to that call by presenting diverse perspectives, spanning the United States, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, on how innovation, inclusion, and intercultural understanding are reshaping enrollment strategies.

The chapters collectively address both opportunities and dilemmas. On one hand, digital transformation and artificial intelligence are revolutionizing recruitment, marketing, and student engagement, offering tools that personalize outreach and streamline enrollment systems. On the other, questions of equity, inclusion, and belonging remain urgent, as political rhetoric, discrimination, and uneven access continue to undermine international student success. Enrollment management today must therefore move beyond numbers. It requires cultivating

environments where international students can thrive academically and socially, supported by intercultural dialogue and policies that promote fairness across race, gender, class, and nationality.

The case studies in this book—from Japanese students rebounding in U.S. institutions, to Ghanaian universities leveraging digital platforms, to Indonesian learners participating in the creative economy, to Brazilian educators navigating dilemmas of democracy—demonstrate that international enrollment is not a single process but a multidimensional ecosystem. By placing technological innovation alongside cultural sensitivity and institutional responsibility, the contributors highlight that international student enrollment is as much about building globally connected campuses as it is about advancing higher education's democratic and intercultural mission (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

In bringing these diverse voices together, this book provides more than analysis; it offers actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders. It underscores that the future of international education depends on aligning digital transformation with human connection, ensuring that the next generation of globally mobile students not only finds access but also a true sense of belonging in higher education worldwide.

Context

International Enrollment Management (IEM) has emerged as a distinct and vital branch of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM), applying its principles specifically to the recruitment, enrollment, and success of international students. SEM, broadly defined, integrates marketing, admissions, financial aid, and retention strategies into a coordinated framework designed to align enrollment outcomes with institutional mission and long-term sustainability (Harmon & Bista, 2025; Howard, 2025; Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013). Building on this foundation, IEM extends these practices to a global stage. It encompasses the full spectrum of international student services—from overseas recruitment partnerships and credential evaluation to intensive English programs, admissions, sponsored program administration, immigration compliance, and retention support (NAFSA, 2023).

Professional communities such as NAFSA's International Enrollment Management Knowledge Community (KC) and standards developed by AIRC: The Association of International Enrollment Management have further formalized the field. AIRC's Institutional Enrollment Management Standards emphasize ethical practice, transparency, and accountability in working with

international students and recruitment partners (AIRC, 2020). Together, these frameworks underscore that IEM is not simply about increasing international student numbers. Instead, it is about building sustainable pathways that attract and support a diverse student body, ensuring that international enrollment practices are ethical, student-centered, and aligned with institutional goals and global higher education priorities.

In the global context, IEM is more than an operational function; it is a strategic driver of higher education's role in diplomacy, economic development, and cultural exchange. Today's international enrollment leaders operate at the intersection of shifting demographics, geopolitical volatility, and evolving immigration policy. They must not only recruit and retain students but also anticipate and adapt to changes in global mobility patterns, regulatory environments, and intensifying international competition for talent.

While domestic enrollment management literature often emphasizes yield optimization and retention strategies, the international dimension introduces unique complexities: cross-border policy shifts, global market diversification, international student services, and the cultivation of institutional brand identity across cultural and national contexts (Wilkins, 2021). International enrollment work therefore demands an agile, data-driven, and culturally competent approach that accounts for both long-term positioning and immediate operational challenges.

Trends, Challenges, and Policy Context

Global Growth and Emerging Constraints

Recent statistics underscore both the opportunity and volatility in the international student market. The *Open Doors 2024 Report* (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024) documented an all-time high of 1,126,690 international students in the United States in the 2023–2024 academic year—a 7% increase from the previous year—contributing more than $50 billion to the U.S. economy. India overtook China as the largest sending country, with 331,602 students (+23%), while China sent 277,398 students (–4%). More than half (56%) of international students pursued STEM fields, reinforcing the direct connection between international education and U.S. workforce development priorities.

Despite these gains, short-term projections signal significant challenges. According to NAFSA and JB International's scenario modeling, reported by

Mowreader (2025) in *Inside Higher Ed*, international student enrollment could decline by as much as 15% in the 2025–2026 academic year—equivalent to 150,000 fewer students—due largely to visa processing delays, heightened vetting protocols, and a temporary suspension of visa interviews during the peak summer issuance season. The projected losses could amount to $7 billion in total economic impact and 60,000 fewer jobs in higher education and related sectors.

SEVIS Data Insights and Seasonal Trends

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security published data from the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) indicating a steep decline in the number of international students in the United States between March 2024 and March 2025. DHS later removed the dataset due to irregularities and subsequently issued corrected figures showing steady year-over-year growth in international student enrollment. SEVIS "by the numbers" remains a critical resource, providing monthly updates that offer near-real-time insights into enrollment patterns. This timeliness makes the dataset particularly valuable for assessing how political conditions and immigration policy changes influence student mobility and institutional recruitment strategies (Andrews, 2025).

Patterns within SEVIS data reveal predictable seasonal fluctuations: substantial spikes in August and September as new students arrive for the fall term, followed by winter declines linked to program completions and transitions to Optional Practical Training (OPT). The timing of visa issuance is therefore pivotal. Disruptions during peak processing months—such as the suspension of visa interviews in June and July 2025 in high-volume sending countries including China, India, Japan, and Nigeria—significantly impacted fall enrollment. Such delays forced some students to defer or abandon study plans, producing downstream effects on institutional enrollment targets, financial stability, campus diversity, and program sustainability.

Shifting Geographies of Global Student Mobility and Market Diversification

While the United States and other Anglophone destinations continue to dominate international enrollment flows, global student mobility is becoming increasingly multipolar. New and emerging hubs—including Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and China—are reshaping global student mobility. Japan, for example, has set a target of hosting 400,000 international students by 2033, expanding English-taught programs and easing visa pathways (The PIE News,

2025). South Korea, propelled by its technological leadership and cultural influence, currently hosts more than 200,000 international students and aims to reach 300,000 by 2027 (OECD, 2025). Singapore's globally ranked universities, positioned at the intersection of Asia and the Global South, attract students through competitive post-study work opportunities and strong regional linkages (The PIE News, 2025). China, traditionally viewed as a sending country, is increasingly positioning itself as a host destination, leveraging scholarship programs, rising university rankings, and its 2024 Degree Act, which expands international degree recognition and partnerships (OECD, 2025).

These shifts underscore that international enrollment management is no longer concentrated in a few traditional markets. Instead, demographic change, policy reforms, and economic strategies across Asia, Europe, and other regions are creating diversified pathways for academic mobility. For institutions and policymakers, this signals the importance of adopting a comparative perspective: student flows must be understood not only in relation to the U.S. or other "big four" destinations but within a broader, interconnected global higher education system (OECD, 2025; The PIE News, 2025).

Regional enrollment trends are diversifying. While India's rapid growth and China's gradual decline dominate headlines, several emerging markets show strong potential. Bangladesh, Ghana, Nepal, Pakistan, and Spain each reached all-time highs in 2023–2024 (IIE, 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa recorded a 13% growth rate, the highest among all world regions for the second consecutive year. These shifts present opportunities for market diversification but also demand tailored recruitment strategies, as cultural, economic, and visa-related factors vary widely by region.

As Phillips and Jones (2024) argue, diversification is a key risk management strategy in the face of demographic volatility and policy uncertainty. Institutions that spread recruitment efforts across multiple global markets are better positioned to weather downturns in any single country or region.

Demographic and Economic Imperatives

Domestically, the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2025) reports that immigrant-origin and international students together comprise roughly one-third of all U.S. higher education students. This includes 1.9 million first-generation immigrants, 3.9 million second-generation immigrants, and over 1.1 million international students. These populations are not only a critical source of enrollment stability but also essential to advancing

institutional objectives related to intercultural equity and belonging. Their contributions extend beyond tuition revenue, enriching campus culture and strengthening the U.S. talent pipeline.

Given projected domestic enrollment declines—the so-called "enrollment cliff" expected from 2025 onward—international students represent a vital growth area for many institutions. However, the financial impact of losing even a fraction of this population is significant, especially for regional public universities and tuition-dependent private institutions.

Policy Environment and Implications for Global Mobility

The national policy ecosystem remains one of the most significant external forces shaping IEM strategies. The 2025 visa processing changes represent a stark reminder of the influence that federal immigration policy exerts on institutional capacity to recruit globally. Under the Trump administration's current approach, increased scrutiny, travel restrictions, and limited consular staffing have already disrupted traditional recruitment channels. For example, NAFSA (2025) reports that June 2025 F-1 visa issuances declined by as much as 90% compared to the previous year in certain countries affected by new travel restrictions.

These policy barriers have ripple effects beyond U.S. borders. Competitor nations such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have intensified recruitment efforts, often highlighting their comparatively streamlined visa processes and post-graduation work opportunities. In this competitive environment, U.S. institutions must leverage their academic reputation, alumni networks, and scholarship programs to remain attractive.

Global mobility is also shaped by broader geopolitical and economic trends. For instance, rising demand for STEM programs—pursued by 56% of international students in the U.S.—positions American universities favorably in fields aligned with workforce needs. However, disruptions to these pipelines, whether through restrictive work visa policies or increased domestic competition in sending countries, can quickly shift enrollment patterns.

Institutional Strategies and Adaptation

In this challenging context, IEM requires a dual focus: immediate tactical responses to policy shocks and long-term strategic positioning. Phillips and Jones (2024) identify brand positioning, targeted outreach to high-yield

populations, cultivating new audience segments, and leveraging digital marketing tools as central to mitigating enrollment declines. Zaccariotto Batista's (2025) research underscores that enrollment growth cannot be separated from the quality of administrative and communication services, which significantly shape student satisfaction and retention. Institutions that integrate robust student support frameworks into recruitment pipelines are more likely to convert admitted students into enrolled and retained students. Wilkins (2021) highlights that cross-border delivery models—such as international branch campuses, micro-campuses, and transnational partnerships—can diversify recruitment risk and extend institutional reach. However, these models require sustained investment, nuanced cultural adaptation, and local stakeholder engagement to succeed.

Conclusions

This volume demonstrates that international student enrollment management is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by technological innovation, shifting political landscapes, and evolving student expectations. The chapters illustrate how digital tools, artificial intelligence, and creative marketing strategies are reshaping recruitment, while also revealing the persistent challenges of equity, cultural adjustment, and belonging. From English language programs as instruments of soft diplomacy to national strategies in Ghana, Japan, Indonesia, Brazil, and beyond, the contributions underscore that enrollment is not only about attracting students but also about creating inclusive environments where they can thrive. Collectively, the book affirms that successful enrollment management requires balancing institutional goals with the human realities of student mobility, emphasizing both access and success.

Looking ahead, the future of international enrollment management will depend on how effectively global higher education aligns innovation with intercultural responsibility. Institutions must strengthen partnerships across borders, expand graduate programs and professional training in enrollment management, and foster policies that ensure fairness and resilience in student mobility. The next wave of global strategies will likely integrate advanced analytics and digital platforms with a renewed focus on student well-being, equity, and inclusion. By centering both technological progress and human connection, international enrollment management can move toward a more sustainable and globally responsive model—one that prepares institutions and students alike for the complexities of an interconnected world.

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Bios:

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authored more than 100 papers and edited over 35 books on higher education, internationalization, and doctoral student experiences. His recent publications include *Advancing Global Competencies in Education: Theory and Practice (2025,* Routledge) and *Global Pathways: Insights on Studying, Working, Thriving Abroad (2025,* AAC&U and STAR Scholars).

Chapter One

Beyond Politics: The Role of Inclusion in U.S. Higher Education for International Student Success

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ABSTRACT

As political shifts reshape the landscape of higher education in the U.S., international students face increasing uncertainty regarding their place in American institutions. Policy rollbacks on DEI initiatives, coupled with growing anti-immigrant rhetoric, risk undermining the welcoming environments that have long attracted global talent. This chapter explores how U.S. institutions can foster inclusion and belonging among international students through culturally responsive strategies, community building, and global collaboration.

Keywords: belonging, DEI, higher education, inclusion, international students, political climate, student success

INTRODUCTION

The United States has long been a top destination for international students seeking quality higher education and diverse cultural experiences. However, recent political and social changes, particularly the rollback of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, have created an increasingly uncertain environment for international students (Choudaha, 2021). These challenges not only affect enrollment numbers but also profoundly affect students' sense of belonging, academic success, and overall well-being. In this chapter, we explore how U.S. institutions can cultivate inclusive environments that support international student success, regardless of the prevailing political winds.

THE CURRENT CLIMATE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Political rhetoric and legislative actions in recent years have significantly shaped the international student experience in the U.S. For example, policies such as travel bans, visa restrictions, and limitations on optimal practical training (OPT) have led to a decline in international student enrollment (Zhou & Qin, 2023). Moreover, legislative measures aimed at restricting or eliminating DEI programs in higher education send a chilling message to international students, who often rely on such initiatives for support (ACE, 2023).

The implications of this climate extend beyond admissions. Research suggests that a student's perceived sense of welcome and belonging can directly affect academic performance, retention, and mental health (Glass et al., 2015). Without culturally responsive support structures, international students are more likely to experience isolation, discrimination, and disengagement (Lee & Rice, 2007).

INSTITUTIONAL INCLUSION: A PILLAR OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Despite these challenges, many U.S. institutions have remained committed to fostering inclusive and supportive environments. Inclusion goes beyond diversity quotas; it involves creating a campus culture in which every student, regardless of nationality, race, religion, or background, feels valued and supported. For international students, this sense of inclusion is closely tied to academic advice, peer support, faculty interaction, and opportunities for cultural exchange (Sato & Hodge, 2015).

One effective strategy is the implementation of inclusive mentorship programs. These programs pair international students with faculty or peer mentors who help them navigate both academic and cultural challenges. For example, the

University of Southern California's "Global Fellows Program" has been noted for fostering relationships that support students' academic and professional goals while encouraging cultural fluency (USC Office of International Services, 2023).

COMMUNITY-BUILDING STRATEGIES

Community-building initiatives play a vital role in reducing social isolation and helping students develop a sense of belonging. Institutions such as Indiana University and the University of Minnesota have developed intentional living–learning communities, intercultural dialog sessions, and student-led cultural organizations that provide safe spaces for identity exploration and relationship building (Fischer, 2022).

Moreover, creating partnerships between international offices and student affairs can help embed inclusion throughout campus life. Orientation programs that go beyond logistical preparation and include cultural acclimation, community norms, and introductions to inclusive values are especially effective. According to Glass et al. (2015), international students who participated in such integrated programs reported higher levels of satisfaction and stronger campus ties.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SUPPORT STRUCTURES

A commitment to inclusion also requires rethinking traditional support services through a culturally responsive lens. Academic support centers, counseling services, and career development programs must be equipped to meet the unique needs of international students. This includes hiring multilingual staff, offering flexible advice hours, and training personnel in intercultural communication (Leong, 2015).

Mental health is a particularly critical area. International students often face stigmas related to mental health in their home cultures and may be unfamiliar with the concept of campus counseling. Institutions such as the University of California, Berkeley, have launched "Let's Talk" initiatives that embed counseling professionals within international student spaces, offering drop-in hours to reduce stigma and increase access (UC Berkeley Counseling Center, 2023).

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSION: A VIEW FROM FRANCE

While the focus of this chapter centers on the U.S. context, understanding international student inclusion through a global lens enhances institutional awareness and cross-cultural learning. In France, higher education institutions also face increasing challenges in fostering inclusive environments for

international students—although the political, cultural, and administrative structures differ significantly from those in the United States.

French universities, which operate under a more centralized and tuition-free public model, often focus less on campus-based student life and more on academic achievement. However, inclusion initiatives have gained traction in response to growing international enrollment and shifting expectations among globally mobile students. For example, several French institutions have implemented "Welcome Desks" (Guichets d'Accueil) that support international students with housing, immigration documentation, and social integration. Some universities have also launched intercultural workshops and buddy programs to promote belonging in academic and community spaces, within some of them, the *Bienvenue en France Label.*

In fact, the "*Bienvenue en France*" (Welcome to France) *label* is an important certification that recognizes and highlights the efforts of French higher education institutions to improve the welcome experience for international students. As part of the National Attractiveness Strategy, this label was launched in 2018, with Campus France[1] ensuring its implementation, management, and facilitation. The *Bienvenue en France label* was created to encourage best practices within higher education institutions and guarantee the best possible welcoming conditions for international students. The label evaluates institutions in 6 main areas comprising a total of 28 indicators: 1. *The quality and accessibility of information* (information must be available in multiple languages); 2. *Welcome services* (a multiservice welcome desk; agreements with local partners and welcome booklets); 3. *Training offerings*; 4. *Housing and campus quality* of life (easy access to housing, integration activities, etc.); 5. *Quality of postgraduate follow-up* (support for professional integration and career development; 6. *Sustainable development* (information, awareness of environmental and societal issues).

The label offers three certification levels, depending on the number of satisfied indicators:

- First level: the institution meets at least 23 indicators, including 16

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1. *Campus France*, created in 2010, is a National Agency responsible for promoting French higher education abroad, managing scholarships from French and foreign governments, and welcoming international students. *Campus France* is jointly overseen by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation.

"Welcome Package" indicators

- Second level: at least 26 indicators, including 18 "Welcome package" indicators

- Third level: All 28 indicators are satisfactory benefits for institutions

Since its launch, 151 higher education institutions were labeled between 2019 and 2023 across France and its overseas territories (Bienvenue en France Label, 2025).

The concept of DEI, as it has developed primarily in Anglo-American contexts, presents several challenges to French universalism (Baruel Bencherqui et al., 2021). The French model traditionally views such recognition as potentially threatening to republican unity and equality. Unlike in the U.S., discussions about DEI in France are often framed within the context of universalism—a principle that emphasizes equality through sameness rather than difference. This can lead to tension between acknowledging individual identities (such as race, religion, or nationality) and promoting social cohesion through common values.

The French republican model, rooted in the Enlightenment and the 1789 Revolution, is fundamentally built upon universalist principles that emphasize the equal treatment of all citizens regardless of their particular identities (Baruel Bencherqui et al., 2021)[2]. France famously does not collect official statistics on race or ethnicity, making it difficult to measure disparities that DEI initiatives typically seek to address Sabbagh (2011). The French model emphasizes strict meritocracy as the path to equality and "French political and intellectual elites opposed for a long time any form of affirmative action, conceived as an infringement of the Republican ideals of meritocracy and of 'indifference to differences' between citizens." (Bereni, 2007).

Nonetheless, many French educators and administrators are increasingly recognizing the importance of culturally responsive practices and student-centered inclusion models. By integrating insights from both systems, we can better understand how inclusive strategies must be tailored to institutional,

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2. Baruel Bencherqui, D., Beau, G., & Bazin, Y. (2021). Problèmes et enjeux de l'accueil d'étudiants étrangers sur les campus universitaires : diversité, exclusion, inclusion et cosmopolitanisme. *Revue Internationale de Psychosociologie et de Gestion Des Comportements Organisationnels*, *Vol. XXVI*(66), 137–161. https://doi.org/10.3917/rips1.066.0137

cultural, and policy contexts. International collaboration—whether through faculty exchanges, joint research, or comparative case studies—offers valuable pathways to innovate and sustain global student belonging.

CASE STUDIES

Several U.S. institutions have implemented exemplary programs that demonstrate how inclusion can be operationalized to support international student success. These models offer scalable practices for other institutions facing political and cultural challenges.

- Arizona State University: Global Education Office (GEO) - ASU′s Global Education Office provides comprehensive support for international students through prearrival preparation, community engagement, and cultural adaptation. Their "Global Peer Mentor" program pairs new international students with experienced student leaders to foster community and support (Arizona State University, 2023).

- Michigan State University: International Student Success Program (ISSP) - MSU's ISSP is a credit-bearing first-year experience program that helps international students transition academically and culturally through workshops, advice, and integration support (Michigan State University, 2023).

- University of Minnesota: Intercultural Connections Program - This peer-based program promotes intercultural friendships and dialog through group activities and community-building events, fostering a stronger sense of belonging for international students (University of Minnesota, 2023).

CASE STUDY: University Paul Valéry of Montpellier as a model for international students′ inclusion

Université Paul-Valéry de Montpellier (UPVM) stands out as a case of inclusive practices for international students. As a recipient of the *"Bienvenue en France"* Label, the university has developed a comprehensive approach to ensuring international student success through various targeted programs and support services. It has a student population of over 20,000, with international students representing 13.8% of the total enrollment. In addition to academic programs, the UPVM provides extensive support services, such as "Exemption of non-EU students from differentiated enrollment fees". Among its inclusive initiatives, the following can be mentioned:

The IEFE (Institut d'Études Françaises pour Étrangers- Institute of French Studies for Foreigners). At the core of UPVM's international student support system, since 1948, it has been dedicated to teaching French as a foreign language. The Institute "focuses on international openness and exchanges" and aims to "provide students with quality teaching and to make them ambassadors of the French language throughout the world. Furthermore, the DU (University Diploma) *Passerelle pour étudiants en Exile (* Gateway Diploma for Students in Exile) is *o*ne of the most innovative inclusion programs; it demonstrates the university's commitment to educational access for vulnerable populations. This program provides 200 hours of French lessons (15–18 hours per week) and leads to a University Diploma. It specifically targets refugee students and those with international or temporary protection status.

The university's commitment to international student inclusion has been recognized through the following:

The "Bienvenue en France" label (2020--2028) and the "*Qualité français langue étrangère*-Quality French as a foreign language" label were awarded to the IEFE for the fourth consecutive time in 2019, receiving the maximum rating of three stars in all five evaluation areas. In addition, an active member of the MEnS (Migrants in Higher Education" Network (MEnS - "Migrants dans l'Enseignement Supérieur") network demonstrates its commitment by hosting the MEnsS general assembly and actively developing and sharing best practices in refugee student integration.

LINKING INCLUSION INITIATIVES TO RETENTION AND ENROLLMENT

While this chapter highlights several promising institutional practices, a critical question remains: do these efforts actually influence retention and enrollment outcomes for international students? Although direct program-specific data may be limited, the broader body of research supports a clear connection between inclusion initiatives and improved student outcomes.

Studies have shown that a strong sense of belonging, often fostered through mentorship, culturally responsive support, and intentional community-building, has a measurable impact on persistence and academic performance among international students (Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015). Inclusive programs reduce barriers to engagement and promote academic and social integration, both of which are key predictors of student retention.

Moreover, institutions that actively invest in global engagement and intercultural support tend to see more stable international enrollment trends over time, even during periods of political or economic uncertainty (Choudaha, 2017). These institutions often develop reputations as "welcoming campuses," a factor increasingly influential in prospective students' decision-making processes.

This connection is particularly urgent in the current political climate under President Donald Trump, where federal support for international education, including long-standing programs such as Fulbright, is being reconsidered or threatened. In this context, continuing to be intentional and persistent with global engagement efforts is more important than ever. Higher education institutions must not only maintain their commitment to international inclusion but also advocate for the broader societal and diplomatic value of these programs.

By embedding inclusion into institutional identity and student services, colleges and universities not only create equitable learning environments but also enhance their global competitiveness. In an era where international student recruitment is both politically sensitive and economically significant, fostering inclusion is more than a moral imperative, it is a strategic necessity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS & INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Institutions cannot fully shield students from broader political forces, but they can model inclusive leadership and advocate for international education. University presidents, boards, and associations must be vocal about the value of international students to their institutions and communities. Public statements, internal audits of inclusive practices, and sustained investment in global education programs are essential tools for navigating political uncertainty.

National associations such as the NAFSA: Association of International Educators and the American Council on Education (ACE) continue to advocate for immigration reform and international student support at the federal level. Institutions can partner with these groups to amplify their message and align their campus strategy with long-term global engagement goals.

CONCLUSIONS

Inclusion in U.S. higher education is not simply a political issue; it is a foundational component of student success and institutional excellence. As international students face new and intensifying challenges, higher education leaders have an opportunity and a responsibility to reaffirm their commitment

to global diversity, cross-cultural learning, and human dignity. By embedding inclusive values across academic, social, and support systems, institutions can foster environments where international students not only persist but also thrive, regardless of the political climate.

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Chapter Two

What International Students Want And What They Actually Get: Bridging Expectations With Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

As global competition intensifies, U.S. institutions face pressure to meet international students' evolving expectations for academic quality, career readiness, and poststudy outcomes. This chapter examines how hybrid professional programs (HPPs) have emerged as flexible, work-integrated alternatives to traditional programs. While such models face scrutiny regarding regulatory compliance and academic rigor, they appeal to students navigating complex visas and job markets. Drawing on interviews with students, faculty, and experts, this chapter explores real student experiences, institutional strategies, and comparative insights from Canada's employment-focused approach.

Keywords: curriculum innovation, experiential learning, higher education, international student outcomes, student expectations

A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE IN GLOBAL EDUCATION

For decades, the United States has stood at the forefront of global education, attracting international students with world-class institutions and the implicit promise of long-term opportunity. However, today, that model is being reconfigured. In an era marked by shifting immigration policies, rising geopolitical competition, and demographic change, the U.S. is recalibrating its approach to global talent. While the appeal of American education remains strong, the pathways that once led from classroom to career—and potentially to residency—are no longer as clear or accessible. As a result, the established assumptions about studying in the U.S. are being questioned.

The U.S. share of the global international student market fell from approximately 28% in 2001 to 16% by 2024 (ICEF Monitor, 2024; NAFSA, 2019, 2020). Recent SEVIS data from March 2025 also indicate an 11% year-over-year drop in active international student records, indicating continued disruption in U.S. competitiveness (ICEF Monitor, 2025).

SETTING THE STAGE: STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Pursuing higher education in the United States represents a significant financial investment for international students and their families. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for the 2022–23 academic year, the average total cost of attendance—including tuition, fees, room, and board—was approximately $58,600 per year at private nonprofit 4-year institutions. Moreover, public 4-year institutions for students living on campuses average approximately $27,100 annually (NCES, 2024).

This financial motivation is closely tied to students' postgraduate aspirations. A 2023 survey conducted by Interstride reported that 41% of international students expressed a desire to work in the United States for a few years following graduation, whereas 31% indicated a long-term goal of staying permanently (Interstride, 2023). These findings underscore the pivotal role that poststudy work opportunities and immigration pathways play in the decision-making processes of international students.

THE REALITY CHECK: EXPERIENCES ON THE GROUND

Despite their aspirations, F-1 visa holders face narrow legal paths to employment. On-campus work is limited to 20 hours per week and is often unavailable. Curricular Practical Training (CPT) allows off-campus employment tied to the academic program, whereas optional practical training (OPT) provides 12

months of post-completion work, with a 24-month extension for STEM fields (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2025).

Upon the conclusion of OPT, students wishing to remain in the U.S. must typically seek employer sponsorship through the H-1B visa program. This program operates on a lottery basis, with approximately 34.9% of eligible applicants selected for H-1B visas in fiscal year 2026 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2024). Even those selected must still undergo the rigorous process of securing H-1B status and, later, navigating the employment-based immigration system if they seek permanent residency.

The Michelle from El Salvador illustrates this reality. She earned her B.S. in Integrated Marketing Communications in 2021 and came to California for a master's degree at CSUSB. During her program, she held on-campus roles and completed a CPT-authorized internship. She began OPT after graduating in 2023, but like many international students, she was not selected in the H-1B lottery—leaving her without a clear path to remain in the U.S. long term. "I had a role lined up when I started my CPT," she said. "The school helped a bit with my resume, but job search support for international students was minimal." Michelle's story highlights the delicate balance that international students must maintain—juggling legal status, professional growth, and an uncertain future in the U.S.

COMPARATIVE INSIGHT: CANADA'S APPROACH TO WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Canada has emerged as a leading destination for international students by offering a range of flexible work opportunities during their studies. International students who are enrolled full-time at designated learning institutions and hold valid study permits are permitted to work off-campus for up to 20 hours per week during academic sessions and full-time during scheduled breaks without needing a separate work permit (Government of Canada, 2023a). Additionally, students whose academic programs include mandatory work-integrated learning components may apply for a co-op work permit to participate in these placements (Government of Canada, 2023b). Upon graduation, eligible students may apply for a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP), which is valid for up to three years, depending on the duration of their program of study (Government of Canada, 2023c).

Canada also leads in work-integrated learning through its co-op education model, which allows students to alternate academic study with paid, field-related

work placements (CEWIL Canada, 2021). Universities such as the University of Waterloo, Simon Fraser, UBC, and the University of Toronto offer robust co-op programs supported by employer networks and academic credit systems (University of Waterloo, 2023). According to Statistics Canada, co-op graduates are more likely to find full-time employment, earn higher salaries—especially in STEM and business fields—and secure jobs aligned with their education (Frenette, 2014).

Stid Zhang, an international student in computational mathematics at the University of Waterloo, completed five co-op placements in fields such as software development and trading systems engineering. These experiences ultimately led to his current role as a software engineer at Amazon. Beginning his first co-op in the second year of his program, Zhang alternated between academic terms and professional placements through graduation. He found that the hands-on skills gained during his co-op terms were more applicable to real-world software engineering than was classroom theory. Zhang's co-op experience not only gave him exposure to different industries—insurance, tech, finance—but also helped clarify his career direction. "I originally planned to go into actuarial science, but after my first co-op, I switched to a more computer-related path for a better future in the industry".

Between 2012 and 2022, Canada experienced a 201% increase in international student enrollment, growing from approximately 265,000 to over 800,000 study permit holders (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023). In contrast, the United States saw just a 24% increase in international enrollment, rising modestly from approximately 764,000 in 2012 to 950,000 in 2022—with declines recorded between 2017 and 2021 owing to restrictive visa policies and the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of International Education, 2025). These divergent trends reflect how clearly defined work pathways and transparent post-graduation options in Canada have significantly increased global competitiveness.

BRIDGING THE GAP: REIMAGINING PROGRAMS TO MATCH STUDENT NEEDS

Although U.S. universities cannot directly influence federal immigration policy, many are actively reimagining academic programs to better align with the evolving goals of international students. A growing number of institutions are designing offerings that combine academic instruction with real-world applications.

There are three key strategies through which universities can enhance international student outcomes. First, early advice on the CPT, OPT, and H-1B timelines helps students make informed decisions—yet many do not receive this guidance until late in their programs. According to a 2023 Interstride report, a significant proportion of international students indicated that they lacked clear guidance on post-graduation work options, visa procedures, and immigration timelines during their academic experience (Interstride, 2023). Second, tailored career services—including support for visa-sponsored job searches and interview preparation—can help international students overcome distinct job market barriers (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2023).

Third, graduate programs should be intentionally structured to include CPT-eligible, work-integrated experiences. These may include internships, cooperative education placements, project-based coursework, or other forms of experiential learning embedded in the curriculum. These components provide students with essential U.S.-based work experience before graduation and increase their employability for post-completion OPT and employer-sponsored roles (Mason & Monroe, 2024). Research indicates that the benefits of hybrid and work-integrated models are not limited to international students. A study by Eduventures (Gardiner, 2025) revealed that 63% of graduate students who work full-time prefer hybrid course formats, citing flexibility and reduced commuting time as key motivators.

While hybrid professional programs (HPPs) offering "Day 1 CPT" provide clear value, they have drawn scrutiny from industry professionals. Critics argue that allowing students to begin work-integrated learning immediately may appear to circumvent immigration intent, particularly if academic structures lack clarity.

Notably, current guidance from the USCIS states that universities have the authority to determine when a graduate student has met the curricular requirements necessary for CPT and may authorize it as early as the first semester if the experience is an integral part of the program (USCIS, 2025). This highlights the critical role of institutional discretion in balancing compliance with educational integrity. Transparent academic design, intentional curriculum planning, and robust advice are essential to maintaining program credibility while maximizing outcomes for international students.

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATOR PERSPECTIVES

While Hybrid Professional Programs have faced scrutiny regarding regulatory clarity and academic rigor, many educators and administrators view them as timely and necessary responses to shifting student needs.

Dr. Michael Altamirano, a professor at Monroe University, emphasized the value of synchronous hybrid models in supporting graduate students who are balancing coursework with employment. "I teach an MBA capstone course that meets on the weekends. Many of my students live out of state, and our program offers them the flexibility of driving into New York or using public transportation on weekends to pursue their MBA degree". The program's weekend structure allows students to maintain employment and reduce commuting burdens while still participating in face-to-face learning. While many students in these hybrid programs are international, Altamirano noted that domestic students are also increasingly drawn to flexible learning modalities. He observed that higher education has evolved significantly and that today's learners prefer formats—whether synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid—that support fast-paced, experiential, and technology-enhanced learning. "My advice is to explore hybrid learning and implement it in ways that support both institutional success and student success," he added.

From an administrative perspective, Angel Ahmed, CEO of the GNET, emphasized that student demand for flexibility—driven by rising living costs and post-pandemic shifts—has informed the design of HPPs. While concerns around compliance exist, she stressed that thoughtful, goal-aligned program design can address them effectively.

Pat Colabucci, former director of the UCLA extension, echoed this view, framing skepticism as part of a higher innovation cycle. He argued that continuing education units are well positioned to lead HPP development, given their mission to serve adult and nontraditional learners. HPPs, he contended, are not shortcuts but purpose-built models tailored to a growing demographic.

Adding a unique dual perspective, *Rose* (a pseudonym), now a Director at a university in California and formerly a student in a Day 1 CPT program, highlighted both opportunities and pitfalls. As a student, she expressed gratitude for the access such programs provided but also recalled significant challenges: weekend classes were expensive, group projects frequently faltered due to classmates' lack of participation, and she often felt excluded when peers conversed in languages she did not understand. "The programs were valuable, but they were

also misused by some students who did not take their academic responsibilities seriously," she reflected. Now serving as a DSO, Rose emphasizes the importance of compliance and academic intent: "We have to follow the regulations, and F-1 students need to be here for study. It's our responsibility to ensure that their true intentions align with educational goals."

Together, these perspectives suggest that while institutions are increasingly interested in Hybrid Professional Programs as a means to enhance flexibility, career readiness, and access for international students, they must also remain vigilant in ensuring that these programs comply with federal regulations and uphold academic integrity.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Timur Batruddinov, a Kazakh national, represents the growing number of international students using hybrid professional programs (HPPs) to align academic learning with ongoing career development. With an MBA in banking and investment from the University of Pittsburgh and several years of experience in antimoney laundering (AML), sanctions compliance, and risk management, Batruddinov sought a graduate program that would allow him to continue gaining U.S.-based work experience while pursuing further education.

"The Hybrid Professional Program gave me the flexibility to work full-time while deepening my academic foundation," he explained. He selected a university near Pittsburgh that combined academic rigor with logistical convenience and a curriculum tailored to his professional goals—particularly in project management and regulatory compliance.

Batruddinov currently serves as a compliance safety manager and oversees safety audits, regulatory adherence, and risk mitigation strategies. The structure of his program enables him to apply course concepts—such as stakeholder communication, project lifecycle management, and compliance frameworks—directly to his work environment. "The ability to connect classroom learning with real-world application has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the program," he said.

Batruddinov's experience highlights how HPPs can serve as a strategic and career-relevant solution for international students seeking to maintain employment and academic momentum in the United States.

CONCLUSIONS

As international students increasingly seek both academic and career outcomes, U.S. institutions are exploring models such as Hybrid Professional Programs to better align with these expectations. While such programs offer flexibility and practical experience, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful design, regulatory clarity, and sustained support. Ongoing evaluation will be key to ensuring that these models meet both student needs and academic standards.

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Chapter Three

English Language Programs as Facilitators of Soft Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: English language programs (ELPs) operating through universities and colleges, proprietary providers, or independent language schools offer international students an academic and cultural platform to practice global citizenship as cultural ambassadors during and after the completion of their programs of study. Through global classrooms, ELPs foster soft diplomacy, a term the author attributes to an educational experience that defines and highlights the global impacts of such programs on students. While ELPs target students' personal growth through participation in cross-cultural activities and reflective learning, the diplomatic impact they offer is rarely acknowledged. This chapter presents a practitioner-oriented perspective on the role of ELPs in promoting students' growth beyond English while enhancing their study-abroad experience by highlighting the soft diplomacy skills developed through ELPs.

Keywords: English language programs, learning zone, mindset**,** soft diplomacy, vulnerability

INTRODUCTION

English language programs (ELP) are known for their linguistic contributions. However, these dynamic programs offer professional skills and build confidence in ways that are easily overlooked yet can be a powerful recruiting tool for matriculating students. Students who participate in long- or short-term programs receive a soft landing of sorts that gives them a stronger footing than the first time international freshman walking on to a campus for the first time. While extensive positive data regarding matriculation, stronger GPAs, retention rates, and graduation rates is available from on-campus ELPs, the focus of this article is on the soft skills that are inherently taught in our classrooms: vulnerability, growth mindset, and navigating learning zones.

It's graduation day for our ELP, and a shy Japanese student, Rihoko, reflects on her U.S. study-abroad experience, surrounded by other students and friends. The words are familiar—"friends," "food," "new places," "new experiences." I've witnessed the themes before... at every graduation I've attended in my 25 years of experience in ELPs. "I met people and made friends from around the world," she says. "I visited New York and Disney, and I learned about [the] Americans. They're nice and friendly."

Today, however, the situation is somewhat different. Rihoko also relays novel discoveries, including her surprise at teachers bringing their pets to class for an activity. "That would never happen in Japan," she exclaims. Her audience chuckles—it likely wouldn't happen in Bolivia, Korea, Oman, or any of the other countries represented at this ceremony either! My mind wanders because each session, it's the same story with minor variations—different countries of origin, voices, and details—but always the same topics: friends, food, travels, and perhaps, finally, a mention of our mission. "I also learned English." Rihoko elaborates. "I'm more confident and ready to work with people from other countries in a global career."

Yes, it's the same story we hear repeatedly, but this is Rihoko's first experience abroad, and this program changed her life. She was willing to publicly present in English, something she would not have done at the beginning of her visit, and she now sees herself in a global context. Those two items, to me, define our ELP's success and remind me that we teach much more than grammar.

I am grateful that she had such a wonderful experience. However, why do ELPs not highlight the *nonlinguistic* contributions they make?

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMS AND SOFT DIPLOMACY

This highly personal (and public) student report highlights what ELPs offer beyond mere English language lessons. They provide a safe environment to explore language, build confidence, and ask culturally challenging questions; ELPs help raise global awareness and teach empathy by providing a forum for reflecting on oneself and culture. Additionally, pre-academic programs focus on study skills, local campus resources, and building on-campus relationships They do this by creating a space for students to experience vulnerability, fostering a growth mindset, and shuttling students between comfort zones and learning zones. Practicing these skills contributes to a personal exploration of *soft diplomacy*.

n the United States, ELPs provide on-campus English language training and cross-cultural experiences for multilingual learners of English (MLEs). ELPs welcome students from around the world to the local community and provide a sense of belonging through long-term relationships in an otherwise highly transactional educational system. They provide a concrete window into the more abstract academic domains of language acquisition, skills development, and cross-cultural adaptation, which align with disciplines such as anthropology, communication, education, linguistics, psychology, and sociology. For ELP students, however, it is about the learning experience and meeting their own goals within that experience, which often includes pre-academic acculturation and learning about the academic expectations of the campus..

ELPs deliver English language training for students in preacademic studies, inbound study abroad, professional language, graduate preparation, and community English programs. They offer program-specific services, excursions, and cross-cultural events through immersion. In ELPs, students develop language skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar while adhering to strict U.S. immigration regulations regarding full-time and part-time study (Reese & Helms, 2018). While English and academics are the stated focus, I have observed several additional skills that students acquire by being part of a community that broadens their global perspectives.

Soft diplomacy is a portmanteau of soft power and cultural diplomacy (Ernst, 2025), with *soft power* being the ability to "coopt rather than coerce" (Soft Power, 2025) and cultural *diplomacy* being people-to-people diplomacy. Joseph Nye popularized the term "*soft power*" in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead*. Later, Nye (2008) described that "a country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values and policies" (p. 94). The concept and value of *cultural*

diplomacy are thoroughly explored in the 2001 Department of State report "Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy," which describes public diplomacy as "cultural activities that a nation's idea of itself is best represented" (p. 1). What better place for the twain to meet than an international educational experience where cultural representation is manifested through students learning in a common space?

My observation is that students *practice* soft diplomacy when they learn to be vulnerable, develop a growth mindset, and explore beyond their comfort zones. They then leave their ELPs as *practitioners* of soft diplomacy. When multilingual and multicultural learners coexist in areas where the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy overlap (e.g., classrooms, conversation partners, and excursions), students engage in soft diplomacy by serving as cultural ambassadors through their participation in ELPs. Because having a common language is at the heart of any interaction, it is a foundation of cultural diplomacy. ELPs readily build linguistic foundations, but the path to achieve these goals is not always easy. Language learning is inherently risky. Language acquisition is not about learning formulas and words that are then combined in a mathematical manner to deliver perfectly formed concepts. English is particularly messy, with numerous borrowed words and spellings, unlike Finnish or German, in which spelling accurately reflects pronunciation. "The only rule in English is that there are exceptions to every rule."

Vulnerability

To be a good learner in an English or geology class, one must be vulnerable and open to making mistakes, which are common when learning new vocabulary: there are risks of misspelling, mispronunciation, or even misuse of word forms. One commonly mispronounced word is the *photographer*. A photograph is very different from a phoTOgrapher, with both a stress shift and morphological differences, illustrating one of the many complexities of the English language.

Language is also about connections, and connecting with people is also rife with risks—the risks of being rejected, misunderstood, or completely ignored. Brené Brown, a leading social psychologist and researcher of vulnerability, revealed the importance of vulnerability in her 2018 book *Dare to Lead*, in which she defines vulnerability as "the emotion we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 19).

Brown's 2010 TED Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," highlights the neurobiological need to feel human connections with others. She discovered that

individuals who feel connected also fully embrace vulnerability and recognize that vulnerability is neither positive nor negative; vulnerability simply *is* because it demonstrates the courage necessary for people to share their personal stories. In language-learning environments such as ELPs, such connections become critical; if international students feel disconnected, their learning will be hindered. ELP instructors are often language professionals who have traveled through the world and often speak an additional language other than English. Such personal experiences in vulnerability create connections and supportive environments for students at both the curricular and cocurricular levels.

When people practice vulnerability by sharing their own culture through their personal stories in the ELP environment, they allow themselves to explore their own and others' cultures. Exploration of deeply held cultural values is an exercise in building empathy for the differences that each person embodies. However, being vulnerable is not sufficient. Having a growth mindset also contributes to practicing soft diplomacy.

Mindset

To have a rich and fulfilling English immersion experience, students benefit from having a *growth mindset* as opposed to a *fixed mindset*. This is especially the case because how an individual responds to challenges and interacts with successes and failures is determined by their mindset. Carol Dweck, a renowned motivation and mindset expert, connects mindsets to learning in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006). A growth mindset is highly beneficial for language learning and soft diplomacy. Those with a growth mindset believe that intelligence is learned, skills can be developed, and effort contributes directly to success. Those with fixed mindsets rely on innate abilities and characteristics that they already possess and cannot change.

Learning in ELPs encourages a growth mindset because classrooms provide space for students to go beyond their cultural expectations regarding learning, classroom organization, instructional roles, etc.etc. When instructors promote a growth mindset, students learn to value the *experience.* It is not that the rules of grammar, for example, are not important; it is that they take a secondary place to the *act of learning*–learning about other people, their own (and other) countries, the English language, and ultimately themselves. Another benefit of a growth mindset in a global classroom is that participants *unlearn* stereotypes about others while building social networks. They also become lifelong learners.

The cultivation of a growth mindset has entered mainstream media and been popularized for both educational and professional audiences. In *8 ways to cultivate a growth mindset* (2022), the nonprofit organization Employee & Family Resources published highlights several tangible strategies for English language instructors to incorporate into their ELP classrooms. Strategies such as using feedback and questions, approaching challenges and embracing failure are often modeled by the instructor and built into lessons. Providing relevant and constructive feedback on progress (rather than on ability) and furthering knowledge to help students understand how to internalize feedback, among other aspects, constitute lifelong skills. The last two recommendations in the article are more philosophical. One of these, "taking pride in the journey," is something some students can identify on their own, although others benefit from direct emphasis. Finally, "using the power of yet," is a good reminder for both instructors and learners that a language (e.g.) is never fully mastered; there is always a new word or concept to learn. As I often tell my students, "even native-English speakers are not done learning English. They are learning the same vocabulary and new concepts right alongside you."

Learning Zone

Alasdair White, the author of *From Comfort Zone to Performance Management*, defines a *comfort zone* as "a behavioral state within which a person operates in an anxiety-neutral condition, using a limited set of behaviors to deliver a steady level of performance, usually without a sense of risk" (2008, p. 2). There is comfort in the familiar, and moving away from the familiar (e.g., expected behaviors) is a courageous act. I always remind students how brave they are for stepping out of their comfort zones and into ELP academic and cultural *learning zones.* Uncertainty can be daunting and overwhelming for international students, often leading to homesickness and culture shock. The experience requires adjustment and adaptation to new community and learning environments.

Stepping outside of one's comfort zone is healthy and beneficial because "personal growth and development often require venturing beyond the bounds of what one currently knows, so it is important to stretch and try new things" (2023, Forbes Expert Panel). Page (2020) describes how "leaving the comfort zone fosters self-actualization, resilience, a growth mindset, and greater self-efficacy" (para 1). In an ELP, for example, students are continually being challenged to increase their language proficiency. In safe classrooms, students leave their comfort zones by being vulnerable and relying on a growth mindset to explore language and content in their learning zones, where they "gain new skills and deal with challenges resourcefully" (Page, 2020, From Comfort Zone to Growth

Zone section, para. 2). They question what they know about themselves and the world around them as they learn English. Students learn areas of language in which they have strengths and those which they need to improve. Instructors provide extensive feedback (often critical) on language, and hopefully, students learn to appreciate why feedback matters and how it helps them grow. The simple acts of asking students "What did you do this weekend?" and following up with leading questions such as "What did you learn from that experience?" are relationship-building conversation starters that encourage students to think about experiences as learning opportunities. Language relies on incremental change for constant progress along a continuum of acquisition. An example of traversing the different zones can be described by learning vocabulary. An example of traversing learning and comfort zones can be understood when striving to internalize the definitions of ten unknown words. Students are in the learning zone when they start recognizing and practicing those terms and then internalize and correctly use them. When they correctly use the right word form in the right context on a regular basis, they expand their comfort zone. Once students learn to navigate the different zones, they can transfer that skill into any content class or career.

In ELPs, language use is the focus, yet much of this dancing across zones has entered political and cultural realms. In one class, roommates from India and Pakistan explained that "it's our governments who fight, not the people," an especially poignant reminder of cultural trepidation, exploration, then comfort.

CONCLUSION

Tying the three areas of vulnerability, mindset, and learning zones back to soft diplomacy and the roles that ELPs play in building cross-cultural bridges demonstrates the additional contributions that ELPs make beyond academic skills. When assigning value to a program, it is easier to highlight the linguistic and academic outcomes of a classroom than to explicate the soft skills that are fostered in an English language classroom. ELPs need to better market what they teach in the realm of transferable, real-life skills. They also need to openly celebrate the diplomatic skills gained from the inherent structure of the English language classroom.Tying these nonlinguistic skills to academic success and future career growth can be a unique selling point for universities as they recruit international students. Learners who can embrace vulnerability, learn from others, view feedback as a source of continuous improvement, explore their potential, take risks, practice self-reflection, and make good employees. Having dedicated space to explore growth zones and expand comfort zones allows for intellectual and professional growth. These language-learning experiences also allow students to

experience people-to-people relationships and see the best that countries have to offer. They become wielders of soft diplomacy because the platform ELPs offer to explore, learn, and grow beyond grammar.

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Chapter Four

AI-Driven, Human-Led: The New Rules of SEO Applied to Higher Ed

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions face unique challenges and opportunities as artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes marketing strategies. This chapter explores AI's influence on search engine marketing (SEM) and content strategies, offering actionable insights for enrollment professionals. It addresses the evolution of algorithms, the adaptation of global SEM strategies, and the responsible use of AI to enhance visibility without compromising authenticity. Real-world examples illustrate how teams can balance human creativity with machine efficiency.

INTRODUCTION

AI continues to reshape search engine optimization (SEO) and digital marketing at an accelerated pace. Higher education marketing professionals increasingly encounter the following question: "Is AI affecting SEO?" The answer is yes, but with important nuances.

Search engines have been utilizing AI for years. This helps them understand the meaning and intent of a search query—a function known as semantic search, which uses machine learning and natural language processing to help Google and other search tools understand what users are searching for.

Generative AI gives search platforms a new level of understanding by synthesizing content rather than merely interpreting queries, thus challenging traditional strategies and adding a layer of complexity to SEO.

Key takeaways from this chapter: New user-friendly generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini are transforming digital marketing by altering user behavior and search engine dynamics. This pivotal moment necessitates a strategic approach to digital marketing, emphasizing high-quality content that aligns with complex algorithms and, importantly, user intent. The effective use of generative AI involves leveraging it as a collaborative tool—assisting in content ideation, keyword research, and metadata generation—while maintaining human involvement to ensure accuracy, authenticity, and alignment with the institutional voice.

From content creation to campaign execution, the role of AI is growing, but so is the need for human oversight. This is not a set and forget scenario. This chapter unpacks recent shifts and offers guidance for adapting institutional digital marketing strategies as these tools continue to evolve.

Evolution: From Semantic Search to Generative Intelligence

AI has long shaped SEO, but the rise of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini, has fundamentally altered user behavior. According to a 2024 survey by Evercore, 8 percent of U.S. respondents now use the ChatGPT as their primary search engine. Adobe Analytics reports even broader traction: 39 percent of the 5,000 US consumers surveyed had used generative AI for online shopping, with over 50 percent planning to do so in the future.

Meanwhile, Statista shows that Google's search market share has recently dipped below 90 percent—a modest shift but a meaningful shift. Analysts speculate

that younger, digital-native consumers interested in exploring new and alternative ways to search may be behind this shift. Furthermore, Google's AI overviews, which provide AI-generated summaries in addition to search results, have led to fewer users clicking through to original websites, affecting publishers' traffic.

Marketers have also taken note of generative AI platforms that create synthesized responses from vast datasets, often reducing the visibility of individual web pages. Despite concerns and new user behaviors, SEO remains critical. Effective digital marketing to maintain visibility today requires an understanding of how generative tools prioritize content.

Continued Relevance of SEOs

While generative AI has transformed information retrieval, it has not replaced traditional search engines. Given current user behavior and platform limitations, this approach is unlikely to be useful in the foreseeable future.

ChatGPT generates responses on the basis of patterns and knowledge learned from its own language learning model (LLM), which is different from the real-time crawling of the web that search engines do. ChatGPT and its peers are more suited for synthesizing information, creative assistance, and interactive queries that enable users to dig deeper into research.

Google remains essential for real-time, location-specific information, such as finding a public transport route to a campus or food nearby. Plus, now, with its integration of Gemini AI into its search page, Google displays high-ranking content (as deemed by its algorithm) into synthesized summaries, making SEO much more critical. Institutions must prioritize relevance by producing original, timely, user-centric content and optimizing it.

What AI-Assisted SEO Implementation Looks Like

SEO can be thought of as a process of intentional content alignment—understanding what your audience is searching for and connecting that query to the content you want them to discover. At its core, SEO involves matching user intent with relevant, high-value content.

Effective SEO starts with keyword research using tools such as Google Keyword Planner, Ahref, or SEMrush. These platforms help identify high-volume, low-competition keywords that reflect real search behavior and support institutional marketing goals and now increasingly increase visibility in generative AI results. Once identified, these keywords are integrated into content—website

pages, blog posts, and landing pages—early and naturally. Keywords should be avoided, which can reduce readability and harm rankings. Instead, keywords are used logically and contextually, ensuring a seamless and engaging reading experience.

AI-powered platforms such as SurferSEO and MarketMuse can analyze content against top-performing pages and suggest improvements in structure, tone, and keyword distribution to further boost SEO. Some platforms are also starting to consider how content performs in generative AI outputs—an early step toward GEO or generative engine optimization awareness (more than one minute).

On the backend, the metadata are optimized by including the primary keyword in the title tag, meta description, and URL. These elements play a critical role in how search engines evaluate and display content. Well-structured metadata also help AI systems correctly interpret and summarize their content. The original content is then refined and published via responsive design to provide a seamless user experience across devices. There's a lot to unpack in this counsel for those not steeped in digital marketing terminology—some readers may need to "call a friend."

Messaging also matters. Content that speaks directly to user needs performs better than generic statements do. For example, a headline such as "You can afford our university – here's how" aligns with student concerns and improves both user engagement and generative discoverability.

It is also important to analyze top-ranking pages within the desired niche. AI-powered tools can now surface patterns not only in structure, keywords, and tone but also in how likely content is to be referenced by generative AI systems.

Note, however, that while AI can streamline SEO workflows, overreliance on AI-generated content risks reduce page performance or even SEO penalties. Human oversight remains essential to ensure accuracy, alignment with institutional voice, and content freshness. Consider that your competitors are using the same AI tools you are which can result in very similar (if not the same) AI generated content in use by distinct institutions (ouch!). Creative editors remain critical to deploying engaging and authentic content. With respect to GEO, originality and credible sourcing are even more critical—AI systems tend to ignore repetitive or derivative content.

GEO: A New Layer of Content Optimization

Unlike traditional SEO, which focuses on search engine ranking, GEO is about structuring and phrasing content in ways that make it more likely to be sourced and summarized by AI models such as Gemini or ChatGPT. Optimizations prioritize clear, authoritative, and user-centric messaging when generating answers, so their content must be optimized for humans and AI.

Optimizing for GEO means considering how your content might be cited in AI-generated summaries. It is in your interest to create content that provides concise answers to common questions, including credible citations, and writing in a format that aligns with AI prompt patterns. Importantly, original research, proprietary data, and well-sourced statistics significantly improve the chances of the content being referenced. AI systems tend to favor content that brings new, trustworthy information into the ecosystem, so unique content gives your content more weight in generative responses.

The bottom line: marketers need to optimize content with both search engine algorithms and generative AI synthesis in mind.

Beyond strategy and the practicalities of implementation, institutions must consider how to usefully and ethically integrate AI into content workflows, especially as content begins to serve not only human readers but also AI interpreters.

Generative AI as Collaborator, Not Creator

When applied strategically, generative AI functions best as a thinking partner—not a substitute creator. Effective uses include the following:

- Simulating student queries to inform keywords and prompt aligned research

- Generating content ideas on the basis of emerging trends and user behavior

- Drafting metadata and headings optimized for both users and AI discoverability

- Suggesting structures for landing pages or program descriptions that align with top-performing content

Institutional voice and authenticity cannot be replicated by AI alone. Editorial oversight ensures accuracy, distinctiveness, and mission alignment. AI-generated content can sometimes surface unverified or outdated information, so fact-checking and contextual validation are nonnegotiable steps in the workflow. The best bet for content creation: Investing in skilled marketers who know how to use AI with strategic intent.

Search Engine Marketing (SEM) in the Age of Advanced Algorithms

AI is reshaping search and paid digital marketing. Google Ads and similar platforms offer advanced features such as automated bidding, dynamic ad creation, and responsive ads that adjust in real time on the basis of user behavior. While efficient, these tools demand strong audience insights and meticulous tracking to not only ensure success but also mitigate risks such as overspending on low-intensity keywords that often come with automation.

Pro-tip: Fully automated campaigns often yield high impressions but fall short in terms of engagement and conversion. A hybrid approach—combining automation with human-managed ad groups and manual bidding on high-intent keywords—delivers better ROI.

William Woods University (United States) provides a strong example. Located in Missouri, William Woods strategically combined AI-informed keyword research with human-led content development to dominate Google page one rankings for its common degree programs across the entire state. As a result, they doubled their online enrollment and increased graduate enrollment by 25% over three years. For distinctive programs such as equestrian science and American Sign Language, they secured national first-page Google rankings, drawing students from across the U.S.

Ongoing oversight of AI-driven metrics is essential. Human intervention ensures alignment with strategic enrollment objectives.

Strategies for Reaching Global Markets with AI-Aware Approaches

Marketing to students internationally adds complexity, as search behaviors and platform preferences vary region to region. While Google dominates North America and Europe, Baidu is more prevalent in China, each with unique AI-supported mechanisms.

Effective global strategies include the following:

- Localizing content culturally and addressing region-specific concerns

- Accounting for technological infrastructure differences

- Using AI tools to identify local search trends and tailor content

The core search engine marketing strategy, however, involves the use of AI to support human-managed campaigns and strategies.

Institutional Adaptation to AI-Driven Marketing

The University of Queensland (Australia) exemplifies a balanced approach to adapting to AI's growing role in marketing and digital engagement. In 2023, their global study on Trust in Artificial Intelligence, conducted with KPMG, surveyed more than 17,000 individuals across 17 countries. The findings emphasized that successful AI integration depends not only on technical capability but also on fostering trust, ethical governance, and transparency.

Success is not just about using the right tools; it is about building the right mindset. Building a culture of trust and understanding around AI is critical. Admissions and marketing teams need to be taught not only how to use AI as a tool but also how to think about AI holistically. Develop internal processes, ethical guidelines, and a shared understanding of what AI can and cannot do (and what it should and should not do).

CONCLUSIONS

As SEO and SEM strategies evolve into the era of generative AI, authentic institutional voice and mission must remain central. Generative tools can enhance efficiency, but strategic leadership must remain human-led. New technologies offer unprecedented, transformative opportunities for higher ed marketing.

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Chapter Five

Sustainable Disruption: AI and Digital Transformation

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital platforms are transforming international enrollment management by streamlining application processes, enhancing efficiency, and providing personalized program recommendations that reduce barriers for students. Innovations such as AI-driven learning platforms and virtual reality (VR) labs are expanding accessibility and improving STEM outcomes, with case studies from India and Saudi Arabia showing how centralized digital platforms drive global student recruitment. This chapter also examines how AI equips students with essential technical and interpersonal skills for an evolving workplace. On the basis of extensive research and applied experience in both international enrollment and technology, this chapter offers practical and strategic insights to help enrollment professionals adapt to an increasingly digitally driven education landscape.

Keywords: AI in higher education, Personalized learning, Digital platforms, Poststudy work preparation

Introduction

As technology reshapes education, embracing the digital wave becomes essential for students, educators, and institutions alike. Tools such as AI-driven personalized learning platforms and virtual classrooms not only transform how classes are delivered but also create new opportunities and challenges. To thrive, institutions and policymakers must chart a path through evolving technologies, balancing innovation with accessibility, privacy, and effectiveness to meet diverse student needs.

Integrating AI in International Education

The integration of generative AI in education is rapidly transforming traditional learning models. By enabling personalized learning, automating administrative tasks, and enhancing engagement, AI helps the sector effectively address diverse student needs. In a recent survey of K-12 (primary and secondary) educators, nearly 77% of respondents recognized AI's potential benefits, particularly in reducing time on administrative tasks, with 42% reporting notable efficiency gains (Carnegie Learning, 2024).

AI-powered personalized learning platforms are at the forefront of these advancements, adapting lessons to each student's progress and learning style to provide real-time feedback and guidance. This approach has shown significant potential, with 25% of the K-12 educator survey respondents observing improvements in personalized learning and 18% noting increased student engagement. As these tools continue to develop, they offer new ways to move beyond a one-size-fits-all learning model.

Despite these benefits, some difficulties still lie ahead. Approximately half of the survey respondents identified a lack of training and support as a pivotal barrier to using AI tools effectively. The lack of training likely contributes to why a separate survey of postsecondary educators and students revealed that only 15% of instructors used generative AI tools in their classes, whereas 45% of students used such tools (Wiley, 2024). Addressing this training gap means that institutions must invest in both AI technology and robust professional development to ensure that educators are equipped to navigate these tools effectively.

Figure 1

Wiley Survey, "In general, how do you feel about the use of GenAI in the classroom?"

	Very Positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Very Negative
Students	5%	19%	52%	16%	8%
Instructors	12%	56%		20%	10%

ApplyBoard   Source: Wiley
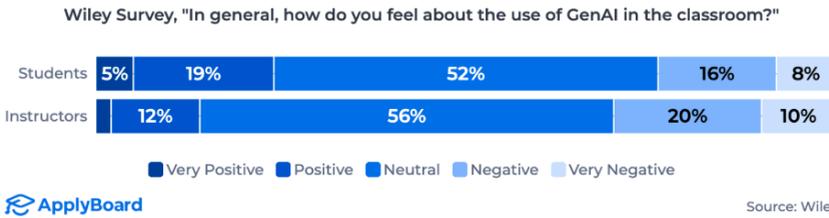
By balancing AI capabilities with comprehensive teacher training, institutions can enhance educational outcomes while preparing students for a tech-centric future.

AI's capacity to increase access to education

The use of AI in educational settings may create more adaptive, accessible learning environments, thereby helping to effectively unlock the potential of students who otherwise face barriers to learning. For example, AI-powered language translation tools such as Google Translate handle more than 100 billion words daily, reflecting the widespread demand for multilingual support (Crangasu, 2025). Currently, universities worldwide support the use of multilingual AI tools that enable students to engage more fully with course content (India Today, 2024). These tools help institutions create an attractive and inclusive learning environment that addresses different linguistic needs.

The classroom itself can also pose challenges for some students, especially when there is limited access to practical, interactive learning opportunities such as real-world case studies or hands-on activities. However, where AI-enhanced spaces are implemented effectively, they can be game-changing. For example, virtual reality (VR) labs allow students to conduct experiments in a fully immersive environment. This encourages active engagement and builds a stronger understanding of complex scientific concepts and processes without the need for physical lab space or specialized equipment, which can be costly and space-prohibitive (VR Lab Academy, n.d.).

As VR lab technology continues to evolve, research from Arizona State University (ASU) revealed that students—particularly those from historically underrepresented groups in higher education—achieved higher performance outcomes in VR-based courses than in traditional settings (ASU, 2022). In fact,

the mean score of students in these VR lab sections was 8% higher than that of those in traditional lab sections.

The evolution of tools for delivering education at both hardware and software fronts will be transformative. There are already major advances in building extended reality devices from major AI players such as Google and Meta. This current trend and the previous findings demonstrate the potential of AI and VR to bridge gaps in learning accessibility and provide more equitable opportunities for student excellence in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The ApplyBoard predicts that medical studies will also witness a revolution due to these extended/augmented/virtual reality technologies.

How AI helps increase institutional efficiency

AI technologies are revolutionizing student enrollment by automating tasks that were once labor intensive, such as transcripts, test scores, and identification document verification (Salesforce, n.d.). Automation accelerates processing times and improves accuracy, allowing institutions to handle higher application volumes while maintaining quality control. By reducing manual workloads, AI enables admissions teams to reallocate resources to other critical areas of student engagement and support.

This increased efficiency benefits both institutions and students. For students, faster processing times are associated with reduced stress associated with waiting for enrollment decisions. In turn, this allows them to focus on preparing for their studies earlier and enables a smoother transition into their academic programs. For institutions, increased processing efficiency means both cost savings and greater appeal to prospective students. Past data have shown that delaying a student's letter of acceptance could reduce tuition deposit rates by up to 47% (ApplyBoard, 2022). Likewise, ApplyBoard's latest RP Pulse Survey revealed that student concerns about visa processing times and/or approval rates spiked in 2024, with 57% of respondents citing this as a priority when considering where to study, up from 44% in Q3 2023 (ApplyBoard, 2024).

Figure 2

Top 5 Student Priorities When Considering Where to Study in 2023 and 2024
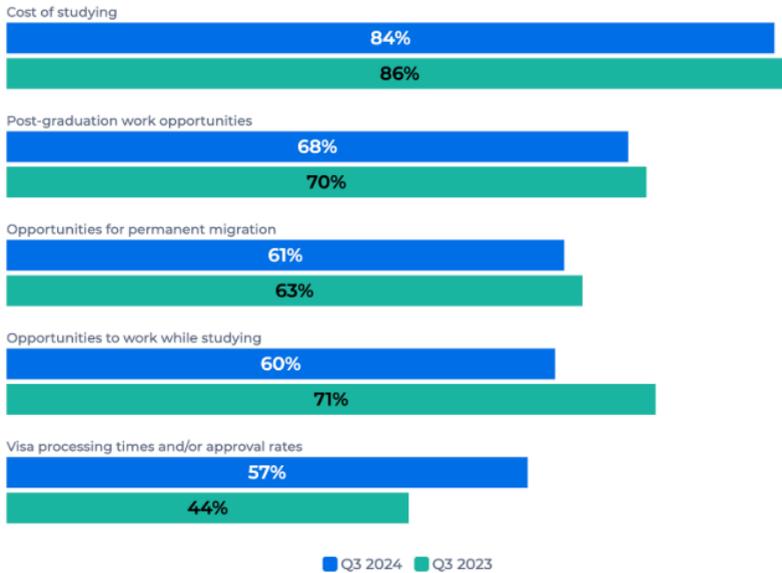
AI also plays a pivotal role in matching students with programs aligned with their academic background, skills, and career goals. By analyzing a range of data points, AI can provide tailored program recommendations that enhance student retention, as students are more likely to thrive in programs that fit their aspirations. Additionally, AI-driven platforms offer seamless communication throughout the enrollment process, with chatbots available 24/7 to provide critical information on application requirements and deadlines. This reduces the workload on admissions staff while ensuring that prospective students, regardless of their time period, can access timely support. Over time, institutions will see their course offerings and education methods evolve to be more personalized and targeted to the students' needs and goals, be they employed, self-improvement, or self-actualization. It is therefore ApplyBoard's belief that the integration of AI into the education process will radically change the sector.

The ApplyBoard anticipates that the institutions that prioritize AI integration will likely emerge or maintain their position as top choices for attracting international talent in the coming years.

Leveraging Digitization to Unlock Student Potential

In addition to AI-driven technology, digital platforms are becoming pivotal tools for destination markets to strengthen their global presence. Today, countries such as India and Saudi Arabia are leveraging increased digitization to enhance their appeal as accessible, dynamic study destinations for a global audience.

In India, the Study in India (SII) portal was launched in 2023 as a comprehensive platform to streamline international student admissions. This portal simplifies the application, visa, and course selection process for leading Indian universities by centralizing all of them on SII, enhancing the country's accessibility for foreign students while providing valuable guidance on course offerings and student resources (The Economic Times, 2023). Similarly, Saudi Arabia's "Study in Saudi Arabia" platform allows international students to easily apply to Saudi universities (Al Amir, 2024).

Australia's Study Australia Experience (SAE) platform also serves as an effective example of other destinations looking to diversify their international student populations. By centralizing information and localizing content to meet regional needs—such as translating resources for Latin American (LATAM) audiences—the SAE platform successfully contributed to increased applications from countries such as Colombia and Brazil (Austrade, 2022). The SAE platform's strategic design shows how addressing specific barriers, such as language accessibility, can be pivotal for attracting international students.

Given the SAE's significant success, the ApplyBoard expects that the sector will see similar digital platforms achieve success. Just as the SAE platform helped Australia broaden its reach into LATAM, these platforms will allow emerging destination markets to appeal to broader international audiences, making education in these countries more accessible and competitive on the global stage.

The ApplyBoard anticipates that these centralized systems will continue to innovate and reshape the international education landscape, as students and their recruitment counsellors prioritize destinations that offer streamlined information access. As the implementation of platforms such as these becomes standard across the sector, key policymakers and collaborators in destination markets should aim to invest in and advance these digital tools, positioning themselves competitively in the digital wave of global education.

How AI and Digitization Can Help International Students Succeed in Poststudy Work Opportunities

In addition to helping unlock international students' potential, AI and digital tools are reshaping their future workplaces. According to McKinsey (2024), 67% of surveyed business leaders expect their organization to increase its investment in AI over the next three years, with analytical AI tools focusing on creating value, particularly in terms of human resources and recruitment functions. Furthermore, three of every four respondents predicted that generative AI would lead to significant or disruptive changes in their industry.

Figure 3
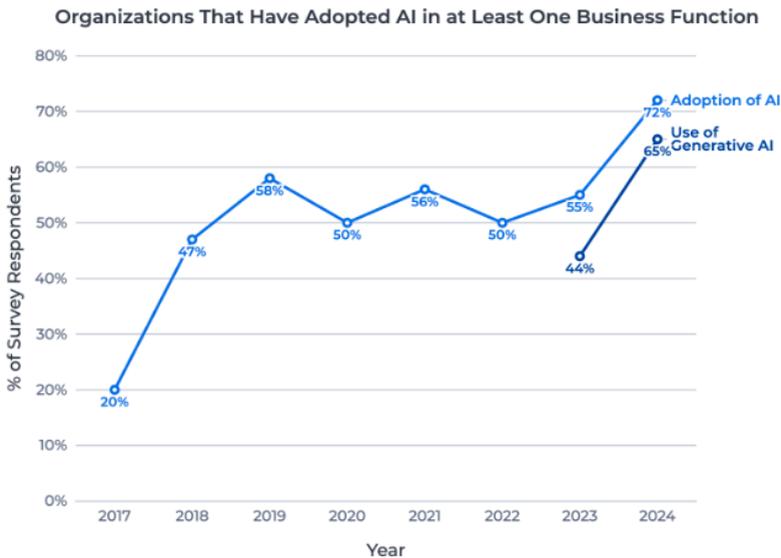
Building international students' competency with emerging technologies is therefore essential, as these capabilities will be foundational not only for adapting to modern workplaces but also for driving their future success in an evolving global job market. According to Microsoft (2023), 82% of business leaders believe that AI-related skills are essential. Critically, the Microsoft report highlights that learning to work alongside AI is not just about building technical capacity but also prioritizes interpersonal skills, including analytical, emotional, and critical thinking skills (Microsoft, 2024). In support of this finding, LinkedIn (2023)

noted that 92% of American executives believe that interpersonal skills are more important than ever.

Additionally, WiseWorld (n.d.) reported that 85% of career success comes not from technical skills but from soft skills. By 2030, soft skill-intensive occupations are expected to account for two-thirds of all jobs and grow at a rate nearly 2.5 times greater than that of other occupations (Robinson, 2024).

AI-driven platforms are increasingly valuable tools for helping international students develop these essential soft skills. In general, studies have shown that AI tools can increase students' motivation, self-confidence, and interest in learning English (Toner, 2024). However, AI platforms can also help students develop skills specific to their area of study. For example, in nursing education, AI-powered simulations help develop both clinical competencies and confidence: simulations of realistic patient scenarios coupled with immediate feedback better prepare students for encounters with live patients in a clinical setting (Srinivasan, Venugopal, Venkatesan, & Kumar, 2024).

Paving the Way for a Digital-Forward Education Sector

The digital wave in international education is unlocking new potential for students, institutions, and destination markets. AI advancements and digital platforms in countries such as India and Saudi Arabia simplify application processes and offer streamlined pathways for students. By addressing accessibility barriers, these tools amplify the potential reach of international education.

For students, this digital transformation offers adaptive learning experiences and increased readiness for global job markets. AI-powered tools that support personalized learning and build essential interpersonal skills equip students with capabilities aligned with evolving employer expectations.

In the future, integrating AI and digital tools into existing operations will be crucial for institutions and policymakers aiming to lead in the international education sector. Strategic investments in AI-enhanced enrollment systems offer significant advantages: they enable smoother, faster processing of applications and help institutions meet growing demands without compromising quality or support. AI-driven platforms can also provide personalized enrollment experiences by matching students with programs that align with their academic and career goals, fostering higher satisfaction and retention. By expanding access to digital resources, supporting educators, and enhancing student services, key players in the sector can set a new standard for responsive, efficient, and accessible global education.

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Chapter Six

Transforming the Impact of AI in India: Emerging Trends in Student Enrollment and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate the transformative impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on student enrollment and engagement in India. A comprehensive review of the literature highlights the positive role of AI in reshaping student enrollment and engagement through the use of predictive analysis, chatbots, individualized instructions, automated review and customized marketing. A survey study was conducted involving 50 teachers working at the secondary level in government and privately run schools located within Delhi-NCR. A further 17 teachers were subjected to FGDs to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives regarding the role of AI tools in boosting international learner enrollment and engagement. The findings suggest that AI-driven mechanisms play a pivotal role in significant innovation, reducing human workload and positively influencing student recruitment. The use of predictive models supports the identification of patterns that predict student retention, dropout, and development. The study demonstrated that AI has immense capacity to increase student performance and satisfaction for both native and international students.

Keywords: adolescents, automation, artificial intelligence, educators, enrollment, student engagement

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) holds significant potential in transforming the educational landscape by enhancing efficiency, accessibility, and affordability, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes. AI is often referred to as "automation based on associations" and has revolutionized traditional educational technology through two key features: 1) automating reasoning on the basis of inferred associations/relationships present in data and 2) providing access to infrastructural resources that automate decisions about instruction and instructional processes (Cardona, Rodríguez, & Ishmael, 2023). Within the Indian context, AI applications span several critical domains, including personalized learning platforms, virtual learning environments, intelligent tutoring systems, AI-enabled chat bots, assistive technologies for learners with disabilities, and the automation of routine administrative functions. AI facilitates inclusive education by providing customized, adaptive, and assistive learning experiences tailored to the diverse needs of learners, particularly those with disabilities. This aligns with the vision outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes equitable and inclusive access to quality education. Furthermore, AI-driven tools support the development of dynamic, interactive, and engaging educational content such as automated quizzes and assessments, which enable educators to identify individual learner profiles and tailor instruction accordingly, thereby promoting learner enrollment and retention. The provision of real-time, accurate, personalized feedback through AI technologies enhances student engagement by fostering motivation and sustained interest. Additionally, AI-powered Chabot offers academic guidance and psychosocial support, contributing to improved student retention. On the administrative front, AI has streamlined several tasks, such as automated grading systems and biometric attendance tracking, thereby reducing teachers' workload and enabling them to allocate more time to instructional planning and learner engagement (Kenchakkanavar, Rathod, & Kamble, 2024).

Persons with disabilities employ assistive technology (AT) to access web resources; however, web applications commonly report web accessibility issues, and keyboard accessibility issues are highly prevalent. Hence, AI-driven assistive technology, which can support the unique needs of users with special needs, is highly important (Chiou, Alotaibi, & Halfond, 2021). The implementation of AI tools in educational institutions requires the presence of sustained financial resources for their maintenance. The lack of quality control mechanisms may

lead to the utilization of substandard or ineffective AI solutions that are unlikely to produce the desired educational and learning output. Additionally, teachers lack formal training in the efficient use of AI. For smaller schools or colleges, these long-term financial commitments can become a significant barrier. The Indian education sector is currently devoid of standardized frameworks for the evaluation and regulation of AI tools (Kenchakkanavar, Rathod, & Kamble, 2024).

Research Objective: To examine teachers' perspectives on the integrative role of artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing learner enrollment, fostering classroom engagement, and supporting retention within the evolving landscape of education for both native and international learners.

RESEARCH METHOD

A descriptive survey was conducted involving N=50 teachers working at secondary levels in government and privately run schools located within Delhi-NCR, India. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with 17 teachers (out of the original 50) to gauge their perspectives regarding the role of AI-driven tools in supporting the enrollment and retention of international learners.

FINDINGS

The emergence of AI and its incorporation into the curriculum by the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) is driving a notable shift in pedagogy, assessment, learner enrollment, engagement and retention within the Indian educational landscape for both native and international learners. The percentage analysis of the responses obtained from the survey conducted among 50 Indian educators included in Table 1.

Interpretation: The results obtained from the present study indicate that AI-assisted enrollment systems are perceived as making the most significant contribution to enhancing learner enrollment within the Indian educational context, as opposed to teachers (ranging from 48% to 76%). A consistently high proportion of respondents (ranging from 75% to 89%) acknowledged the effectiveness of AI tools in fostering learner engagement. Notably, applications such as *Duolingo* (a free language learning platform) and *ChatGPT* (a conversational chatbot capable of generating text-based content via AI*)* are frequently cited for their pedagogical impact, attributed to their interactive interfaces, gamified learning environments, and provision of real-time, adaptive feedback.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics indicating percentage analysis of responses obtained from participants (N=50) regarding the role of AI in promoting learner enrollment (items 1-4), learner engagement (items 5-8) and learner retention (items 9-12)

S. No.	Items	(%)
	Role of AI in promoting learner enrollment	
1.	AI-enabled applications such as chat bots, learning apps, virtual assistants, have increased the visibility of learning opportunities available for learners.	48
2.	AI-supported platforms such as DIKSHA, Byju's, Khan Academy, E-Pathshala have contributed to increased learner engagement.	60
3.	AI-assisted enrollment systems such as registration platforms, virtual 3-D tours, help streamline and regulate student enrollment.	76
4.	AI tools support learner enrollment by automating the process of learner engagement and reducing administrative workload for teachers	65
	Role of AI in promoting learner engagement	
5.	AI-powered learning applications such as Duolingo, ChatGPT, Grammarly have increased student engagement through AI-driven gamified modules.	89
6.	AI-supported platforms promote real time feedback.	80
7.	AI-based applications provide personalized learning content by adapting content based on user prompts.	75
8.	AI tools support learner engagement with the help of interactive learning systems.	80
	Role of AI in promoting learner retention	
9.	AI tools support learner retention by tracking online behavioral patterns of usage	79
10.	AI tools play a crucial role in identifying at-risk learners through attendance patterns	68
11.	AI tools contribute to higher learner retention by providing customized learning pathways	70
12.	AI tools contribute to higher learner retention by motivating learners through frequent reminders via AI platforms	82

Figure1. Bar graph of teachers' perspectives regarding the role of AI in promoting learner enrollment (items 1-4), learner engagement (items 5-8) and learner retention (items 9-12).
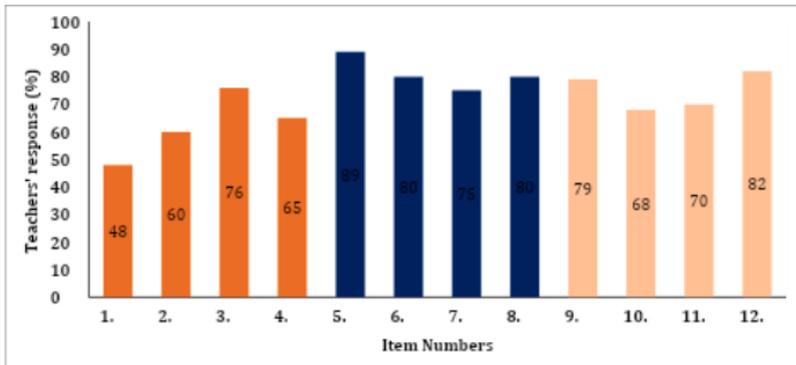
Additionally, a strong consensus (68% to 82%) was observed among educators regarding the potential of AI technologies to support learner retention within the Indian educational landscape.

Role of AI in international student-enrollment, engagement and retention: Out of the 50 surveyed teachers, 17 reported having experience in teaching-learning activities with international students within their respective institutions or organizations. These respondents were specifically asked to share their perspectives on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in facilitating international students by conducting a focus group discussion (FGD). The teachers emphasized that the enrollment of international students often reflects the academic reputation and international engagement of the institution, as these students contribute significantly to institutional diversity and intercultural exchange, which are essential components of a globally oriented academic environment. Their presence can enhance a university's global visibility and may positively influence international rankings, which further underscore their strategic importance to institutions. In this context, the teachers acknowledged the potential support of AI-driven systems and mentioned the core areas where AI tools can support international students across the 03 admission stages—namely, preadmission, during enrollment and postadmission—as the themes that emerged during the FGD. These are mentioned in Table 2 (given below).

Table 2. Themes emerged from the FGD: Role of AI tools in supporting the enrollment, learning, and retention of international students

Admission stage	Support provided by AI tools
Pre-application	• Virtual 3-D/campus tours • AI-driven chat-bots can provide assistance 24x7 and in multiple languages • Automated documentation verification • Use of predictive analysis to predict the enrollment number • Reduces administrative load on teachers
Enrollment and on-boarding	• Personalized support to students • Navigate visa applications and procedures • Provide boarding and lodging/accommodation suggestions
Post-admission: learner retention and success	• Customized learning content • Interactive and gamified content • AI-chat-bots can connect students with mental health caregivers, student counselors • Generate early warning systems, connecting students with academic counselors/coordinators • Connect international students to student peer-buddies, events, social communities, student's club activities

- **At the preapplication stage**, AI technologies offer a range of support mechanisms to enhance the experience of prospective international students. Virtual 3D campus tours provide immersive and interactive experiences for students unable to visit in person, whereas AI-powered chat bots offer 24/7 multilingual assistance, guiding students through admission procedures, documentation, and general queries. Automated systems streamline document verification, and generative AI tools utilize predictive analytics to forecast enrollment trends and identify potential candidates on the basis of engagement patterns and inquiry data. For educators, these AI applications reduce administrative burdens, allowing them to allocate more time to core academic responsibilities such as teaching, research, and community engagement.

- **During the enrollment and onboarding phase,** AI tools offer personalized support to international students by assisting them in navigating complex processes such as visual applications and accommodation arrangements. These tools can provide tailored suggestions for housing, boarding, and lodging on the basis of individual preferences, budget constraints, safety considerations, and proximity to points of interest. This personalized guidance helps ease the transition for international students and enhances their initial experience in a new

academic and cultural environment.

- **At the postadmission stage**, AI-powered systems play a critical role in enhancing the retention and success of international learners by offering customized academic support tailored to individual learning styles, linguistic needs, and interests. These systems utilize interactive, gamified content to increase engagement and provide real-time feedback, helping students adapt more effectively to new academic environments. Additionally, AI tools address the social-emotional needs of international students, who often face challenges of isolation and cultural adjustment. AI-enabled chat bots can connect students to mental health professionals and counseling services, whereas predictive analytics can identify at-risk students on the basis of factors such as attendance and academic performance, enabling timely interventions. Furthermore, AI tools facilitate social integration by linking students to peer-buddy programs, campus events, student clubs, and communities aligned with their interests, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and improving overall student well-being.

Major findings:

- Teachers perceive AI tools to be effective in learner engagement and retention.

- The role of AI in learner enrollment is also significant.

- The data suggest a positive outlook on AI's potential to support various aspects of learner management, especially international students.

DISCUSSION

Role of AI in supporting learner engagement: AI has the capacity to support learner engagement by providing personalized and customized learning content, adapting content per learner needs, etc. The specialized characteristics of AI, such as its adaptability, anticipatory nature and learning nature, support its ease of use in the educational sector (Tuomi, 2018)

The role of AI in assisting differently abled learners: With special reference to learners with disability, AI can be immensely supportive by providing need-based assistance in the form of voice recognition, speech-to-text, and humanoid robots in education that support emotional recognition and training. Additionally, AI can support teachers in special education by addressing learning

gaps by performing SWAT analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, predicting success and generating information (Dubey, Hasan, & Alam, 2022).

Role of AI in providing immediate feedback and evaluation of learners: AI is helpful in optimizing evaluation and providing prompt feedback through quick real-time analysis through face, speech, image recognition and deduction. It provides immediate feedback through an AI-enabled teaching-learning process (Dubey, Hasan, & Alam, 2022).

The role of AI in supporting transformations in the educational sector is as follows: AI has the capacity to transform the educational landscape with the help of adaptive learning technologies, which make use of AI to offer need-based, personalized learning support to learners; AI-powered assessment tools provide quick and comprehensive feedback and sense areas where students need support, thereby reducing the administrative burden on teachers; AI-powered apps and tools can help teachers design learning materials, customize content and develop lesson plans in an intelligent and time-saving manner. AT-driven tools can connect students with mental health caregivers, peer buddies and social communities, thereby increasing their sense of belongingness and community feelings.

AI-powered software makes use of predictive analysis to identify the learners who are likely to apply for a program, enroll and study it. Such artificially intelligent and predictive software can support admission counselors, program coordinators and other personnel in identifying early warning signs by analyzing student attendance patterns, scoring boards, etc., and thereby making informed adjustments and decisions.

CONCLUSION

The 21st century is often referred to as the era of information technology, wherein the knowledge of computers and digital literacy becomes a major skill among all learners. AI has permeated several spheres of our daily lives, helping us navigate online banking, e-commerce platforms, transportation, industrial production, supply chain management and even education, in the form of chat bots, Alexa, Siri, etc. AI-driven education helps promote learner enrollment and engagement; hence, it can be viewed as the future of the education system. Every coin has two sides: AI application in education has its own disadvantages, such as diminishing human values, potential health risks, disruption of mental health, cyber security risks, learning dependence and other challenges (Dubey, Hasan, & Alam, 2022).

Across the globe, several countries, including the United States, support the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning activities. In India, the advent of AI has led to positive transformation in several areas, mainly those concerning equity, access and quality of education. By utilizing vast amounts of data and combining it with the human interface, the educational landscape of the country can be altered (Joshi & Ujjainia, 2024). The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) strongly supports the integration of AI in education across all levels to improve learning and foster the holistic development of learners. It emphasizes the use of AI for supporting AI-driven curricular practices, personalized learning experiences, and the development of workforce readiness skills among Indian students (Dubey, Hasan, & Alam, 2022).

From the findings highlighted in this study, it can be inferred that AI assists educators and does not replace them. AI supports teachers in providing interactive, immediate and innovative evaluations of students' learning results. Educators can utilize AI tools to provide personalized learning support to their learners. It also helps in managing the classroom, recording attendance, and maintaining digital documentation, thereby reducing the workload (Sihag & Vibha, 2024; Kenchakkanavar, Rathod, & Kamble, 2024; Saxena, 2022). AI can support learners by providing personalized learning support; interactive and real-time feedback; doubt clearance; and guidance and counseling support. Such support helps to increase learner engagement and increase the enrollment and retention of students (Sihag & Vibha, 2024; (Kenchakkanavar, Rathod, & Kamble, 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a critical need for targeted financial support and resource availability in educational institutions to ensure the sustainable implementation, management, and maintenance of AI-based tools in teaching and learning contexts.

2. Systematic and formalized professional development programs must be established to equip educators and trainers with the necessary competencies for the pedagogically sound and ethical deployment of AI in their instructional practices.

3. It is imperative to promote digital literacy among learners, with a specific emphasis on the ethical and responsible use of AI tools within the teaching-learning ecosystem.

4. International student enrollment, engagement and retention

can be enhanced via AI-driven tools within educational institutions/universities.

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Bios

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Chapter Seven

Navigating Cultural Transitions: Unfolding the Acculturation Puzzle of International Students

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ABSTRACT

The authors critically examine the complex dual acculturation process experienced by international students as they navigate both academic and cultural transitions in receiving countries. While the literature often conflates international students with other immigrant populations, such a perspective may overlook the unique, dynamic, and goal-oriented nature of international students' experiences. Drawing on the literature on cultural schema activation, the authors challenge and expand traditional acculturation models—such as Berry's fourfold model—and highlight the nuanced realities of international students. We then argue for a reconceptualization of adjustment as a feedback-driven, context-sensitive process shaped by cultural dissonance, self-agency, and cultural constraints. By positioning international students as open systems, the chapter provides a more holistic and theoretically grounded framework for a better understanding of their acculturation experience.

Keywords: Acculturation, Academic adjustment, Cultural adjustment, International students

INTRODUCTION

International students are often characterized as open, intelligent, and dynamic individuals who move into a new culture to pursue their educational interests, which frequently require adjustments to both the cultural and academic settings of the receiving culture. In reality, international students often undergo a dual integrated acculturation process as they adjust to both new academic and cultural contexts. Struggling in either of these areas can lead to dissatisfaction or uncertainty about their academic path, which may ultimately result in dropping out. In 2014, for example, approximately 34 percent of international students reported dissatisfaction with their academic experience and expressed doubts about completing their degree (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). In 2017, da Silva et al. (2017) reported dropout rates as high as 21% for immigrant students and 28% for international students—significantly higher than the 15% dropout rate among their Canadian peers. In addition to facing academic challenges, these students frequently face high levels of acculturative stress, including discrimination, homesickness, and fear. They also report low levels of cultural integration, limited social and academic support, financial hardship, and cultural barriers (Soufi Amlashi et al., 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023).

In general, research on international student adjustment tends to focus on the barriers they face or on potential solutions. However, many of these studies treat international students as a homogeneous group, overlooking their diverse backgrounds and experiences (see Hou et al., 2023). Much of the literature also draws on theories originally developed for other populations, such as immigrants, such as the fourfold acculturation model, or uses qualitative approaches, including phenomenological methods, to explore students' challenges in the host culture (e.g., Erturk et al., 2022). In reality, international students navigate a dual acculturation process as they adjust to both new cultural and academic environments. Nevertheless, some researchers separate academic adjustment from cultural adaptation, whereas others group international students with immigrants and examine psychosocial adjustment more broadly. These differing approaches have led to inconsistent or paradoxical findings, particularly when academic achievement is linked to cultural identification (Sirin & Sin, 2023). For example, several studies have shown that international students often maintain strong ties to their heritage culture and resist identifying with the host culture (Falavarjani & Yeh, 2018; Falavarjani et al., 2020). Other studies have reported no clear relationship between cultural integration and adjustment. Paradoxically, marginalized students—those who do not fully identify with either their home or host cultures—have been associated with high levels of creativity and problem solving (Falavarjani & Yeh, 2018). This finding aligns with the lives of historically

creative individuals such as Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, T. S. Eliot, Igor Stravinsky, and Martha Graham, all of whom spent significant time abroad and often lived on the margins of both their native and adopted cultures (Gardner, 2011). Consequently, such findings are frequently labeled "counterintuitive" or "paradoxical". (Falavarjani, 2018; Rudmin et al, 2015).

Although a substantial body of literature explores the acculturation experience of international students, opportunities remain to further understand the complexity of their lives abroad. This chapter aims to build on existing research by exploring the underlying mechanisms of the dual acculturation process—one that involves navigating both cultural and academic environments.

We begin with a brief overview of key theoretical frameworks that have informed studies in this area, followed by a discussion of how international students engage with and adapt to new cultural and academic contexts. Throughout, we approach international students as open systems—individuals who actively shape and define their understandings of adjustment—which may differ from standard academic measures commonly used in research.

A Review of Acculturation Theories

Much of the existing research on international student adjustment has been drawn from Berry's (1997) fourfold acculturation model, which was originally developed in the context of immigrant populations. This model classifies individuals on the basis of their orientation toward maintaining their heritage culture and adopting the host culture, resulting in four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. These orientations have been widely used to examine how different cultural adaptation patterns are related to psychological, sociocultural, and intercultural adjustment outcomes. For example, individuals who adopt an integration strategy—maintaining their heritage culture while engaging with the host culture—are often found to experience the most positive outcome, whereas those identified as marginalized tend to report the lowest levels of adjustment.

When applied to international students, however, findings sometimes diverge from these expectations. Some studies have shown that international students often report stronger identification with their home culture and a preference for maintaining their cultural traditions over adopting those of the host county—a pattern described as separation (Falavarjani & Yeh, 2018; Falavarjani et al., 2020). These findings suggest that the acculturation experience of international students

may follow distinct pathways that warrant closer examination within the context of their temporary and academic-based migration.

Rethinking the framework: International students and acculturative adjustment

While international students and immigrant groups share some overlapping experiences, they differ in important ways that suggest a need for distinct conceptual frameworks. Unlike immigrants, international students are generally assessed on the basis of academic achievement rather than integration into the host culture. Many plan to return home or move elsewhere after graduation and often have limited engagement with the broader society. Their focus tends to be opportunity oriented—centered on personal growth, educational goals, and future career success.

International students also differ in their structural positioning. They often rely on support from their home countries, possess limited political or social influence in the host society, and may struggle with day-to-day communication despite high academic language proficiency. Furthermore, they are typically viewed as temporary visitors, in contrast to immigrants, who often seek permanent residence and cultural integration.

Academic persistence frequently takes precedence over well-being. These students often endure high levels of stress, health challenges, and heavy workloads. It is unlikely that many would frame their motivation for studying abroad in terms of achieving optimal health and wellness—a point illustrated by Yun and Greenwood's (2022) observation that the idea of prioritizing restful sleep or low blood pressure as a central goal of acculturation might seem amusing or surprising to students themselves. Moreover, international students represent a highly diverse population with varying cultural backgrounds, yet they are often treated as a homogenous group in research. The influence of cultural distance and contextual factors on acculturation has also received limited attention in this domain (Rudmin, 2006).

Much of the scholarship on international students' acculturation has emerged from positivist paradigms that focus on observable outcomes, such as adjustment levels, without fully capturing the processes behind cultural adaptation. This approach may overlook key dimensions of the international student experience, such as limited intercultural engagement, the complexity of multicultural

academic spaces, and the role of self-agency—factors such as motivation and self-determination—that shape the acculturation journey.

Moreover, widely used acculturation models, developed primarily for permanent immigrants, may not fully reflect the lived realities of international students. These models often take an external (etic) perspective, emphasizing fixed cultural identities rather than capturing the fluid and context-dependent ways in which students coconstruct their academic and social experiences. As a result, such frameworks may not adequately explain the relationship between acculturation and outcomes such as academic success or sociocultural adjustment.

In contrast, theories within higher education—such as Tinto's theory of student departure (1987) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2004)—highlight the importance of self-agency in academic performance and adjustment. These and other frameworks (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari's models, student development theories, cognitive learning theory, and moral development theory) provide valuable insights into the academic adaptation process (Falavarjani, in press). However, they often focus on individual agency without accounting for the cultural transformation and unique systemic challenges that international students face. While self-agency is critical, it is important to recognize that it operates within a broader social system that can constrain or enable individual choices (Szabó, 2022).

Viewing education solely as a reflection of personal effort may risk reinforcing narratives that overlook systemic inequities in access and appropriateness—issues particularly relevant for international and immigrant student populations. A more comprehensive framework would address both individual agency and the structural conditions that shape educational experiences.

Thus, the complex reality of international students' dual adjustment—to both academic and cultural contexts—remains an underexplored and evolving area of inquiry. While the literature on international students' experiences abroad is extensive, few studies have examined the underlying mechanisms of these experiences through a cohesive and context-sensitive theoretical lens. As such, this field remains largely atheoretical in its treatment of international students' acculturation, highlighting the need for more integrative and dynamic approaches.

Navigating new academic and cultural contexts as an international student

From a realist perspective, culture is understood as a shared, structured that shapes how individuals interact within their communities. It informs expectations and norms across domains such as education, parenting, work, healthcare, gender relations, and legal systems (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through repeated interactions and exposure, individuals internalize these norms and develop "cultural schemas"--deeply ingrained patterns of thought and behavior that shape how they interpret and engage with the world around them (Boutyline & Soter, 2021). These cultural schemas provide a framework for meaning making in familiar contexts.

When international students enter new cultural and academic contexts, however, they often encounter unfamiliar schema behavioral expectations that may seem confusing or meaningless. This cultural dissonance can lead to varying degrees of surprise and uncertainty depending on the extent and nature of the cultural differences (see Yeh & Inose, 2003). These experiences have been described in various terms, such as role shock (Byrnes, 1966), language shock (Smalley, 1963), cultural fatigue (Guthrie, 1975), and transition shock (Bennett, 1977). Eventually, the term "culture shock" was adopted to describe "a form of personality maladjustment which is a reaction to a temporary unsuccessful attempt to adjust to new surroundings and people" (Lundstedt, 1963, p. 8).

Cultural adjustment has often been illustrated through models such as Lysgaand's (1955) U-curve, which suggests an initial period of optimism, followed by a dip in adjustment levels and then a gradual recovery to higher adjustment levels. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) extended this concept with a W-curve, indicating the readjustment process upon returning home (a second U-curve). However, research has shown that the applicability of these models can vary depending on factors such as educational background and individual experience (Szabó, 2022). For example, according to Szabó (2022), educational attainment may either buffer against acculturative stress due to increased academic ability or reflect prior access to opportunity. Moreover, many studies do not account for the direction, intensity, or context of cultural stressors, nor do they fully capture how international students actively respond to these dynamic cultural and academic environments.

Depending on the nature and magnitude of culture shock, international students may activate different internalized schemas to help them interpret and respond to new challenges. For example, a student from a highly collectivist background

entering an individualistic academic culture may initially rely on familiar patterns of deference, group-oriented decision-making, or emotional restraint. While collectivist cultures often emphasize group harmony and interdependence, individualistic societies place greater value on independence and self-sufficiency. As a result, the student may need to recalibrate their behavior to strike a new balance between seeking support from others and fostering "personal autonomy" rather than strategically pursuing a sort of integration with the receiving context. In fact, this recalibration process is merely due to being accepted in both academic and cultural contexts rather than merely pursuing identification with new cultural contexts.

Importantly, however, international students are not a monolithic group. They vary widely in cultural background (i.e., different cultural schemas), lived experiences (e.g., prior experience living abroad), and demographic factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status. As a result, the stress of encountering unfamiliar academic and cultural systems can activate different schema modes depending on the individual and context. These divergent responses may manifest in a range of behaviors–from adaptive learning strategies to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as social withdrawal, excessive alcohol consumption, substance abuse, or academic disengagement. Adjustment, then, is an ongoing and interactive process shaped by feedback from academic systems (e.g., peers, professors), broader social systems (e.g., traditions, laws, bylaws, social policies), and the physical environment (e.g., climate, food).

From this perspective, behavioral challenges or signs of maladjustment should not be seen solely as failures to identify with the host culture. Instead, they may reflect the misalignment–or lack of reinforcement–between the student's cultural schemas and the receiving environment. For example, if a student's behaviors rooted in their cultural background are affirmed by the new cultural context, they are more likely to continue and internalize those behaviors. However, if these behaviors are misunderstood or rejected, students may modify or suppress them depending on how intense and consistent the feedback is. When such feedback is absent or culturally misaligned, students may struggle to understand how to navigate the new context effectively.

If a student encounters repeated rejections—whether through subtle exclusions, miscommunications, or overt discrimination—their ability to engage with the feedback system may shut down.

In such cases, students may rely more heavily on their internal frameworks to interpret and respond to unfamiliar situations. While this self-reliance may

initially seem adaptive, it can lead to misunderstandings or behaviors that clash with local norms. For example, a student might unknowingly violate expectations by making a culturally inappropriate joke, disciplining a child in public, or overstepping interpersonal boundaries with faculty—all of which are based on their home culture's norms. Without timely, culturally sensitive feedback, such actions can result in serious consequences, including legal or disciplinary outcomes. These dynamics highlight the importance of viewing international students as open, adaptive systems whose adjustment depends not only on internal agency but also on the quality of the external feedback they receive. Supporting their transition into new academic and cultural settings requires an understanding of the reciprocal interaction between personal cultural schemas and the sociocultural systems they enter–especially the reinforcement, rejection, or absence of culturally meaningful cues.

CONCLUSION

International students undergo a unique dual acculturation process—navigating both academic and cultural transitions—that existing theories often do not fully capture. This chapter highlights the limitations of applying immigrant-based models and emphasizes the need for a systems-based approach that recognizes international students as dynamic and culturally diverse individuals. By focusing on the activation of cultural schemas and the role of feedback from academic and social environments, this perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of their adjustment experiences and underscores the need for more tailored, context-sensitive support frameworks.

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Chapter Eight

Rebounding Japanese Student Enrollment in U.S. Education: Successes and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

With decades of decline and a sharp pandemic-induced drop, Japanese student enrollment in U.S. education has rebounded. This paper analyzes post–2020 recovery trends shaped by government initiatives, institutional collaboration, and shifting student preferences. Strategic efforts illustrate renewed momentum. U.S. institutions are responding with more flexible, affordable, and culturally responsive models. These developments signal the potential for a more inclusive and sustainable era of the U.S.–Japan educational exchange.

Keywords: bilateral educational cooperation, cultural responsiveness, intensive English programs (IEPs), Japan Outreach Initiative (JOI), Japanese student mobility, TOBITATE! Study Abroad Initiative, U.S.–Japan relations

INTRODUCTION

For two decades, Japanese student enrollment in U.S. educational institutions steadily declined, reaching a historic low during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2000, more than 46,000 Japanese students studied in the United States; by 2020–2021, that number had dropped to approximately 11,785 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022). Scholars and policymakers attribute this long-term decline to Japan's economic stagnation, expanding domestic opportunities in Asia, and a decreasing interest in overseas education among Japanese youth (Asia Society, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this trend. Data from the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) show that only 240 Japanese students went to the U.S. from 2020–2021, compared with over 18,000 from the previous year (Kyodo News, 2021). Travel restrictions, institutional closures, and global uncertainty nearly completely halted student mobility.

Despite these setbacks, signs of recovery have emerged since 2021. A post-COVID-19 rebound is underway, supported by new initiatives and partnerships designed to re-engage Japanese students with American higher education (Asia Society, 2023; Kyodo News, 2022). This paper analyzes recent and emerging strategies that have contributed to recovery and highlights key government policies, institutional collaborations, and cultural outreach efforts.

POST-2020 RECOVERY TRENDS IN JAPANESE STUDENT ENROLLMENT

Enrollment Rebound

After the collapse in 2020, Japanese students in the U.S. began to recover. According to Institute of International Education's Open Doors data, enrollment rose from 11,785 in 2020–2021 to 13,449 in 2021–2022 and then to 16,054 in 2022–2023 (IIE, 2023). This upward trajectory reflects both renewed interest and the gradual reopening of international borders. A visual timeline of Japanese student enrollment from 2000--2023 illustrates this dramatic decrease and recovery trend.

Recovery has been particularly strong in intensive English programs (IEPs), which have long served as a common starting point for Japanese students. In 2022, IEP enrollment across the U.S. surged by 63% over the previous year, followed by an additional 6% growth in 2023. "This covers over 700 U.S. IEPs and includes both in-person and online students" (ApplyBroad, 2023,

para. 1). Total IEP enrollment reached 67,924 students in 2023, with Japanese students representing the largest nationality group—approximately 16% of all participants (The PIE News, 2023). Approximately 10,000–11,000 Japanese students enrolled in the U.S. IEPs from 2022–2023, compared with only 4,200 at the pandemic's low point (IIE, 2023; The PIE News, 2023). These figures signal a robust return of demand for English-language education among Japanese students.

Shifting Preferences

While overall numbers are rebounding, Japanese students' preferences regarding study formats and destinations have evolved. A 2023 survey by the Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS) revealed that approximately 34,300 Japanese students studied abroad in 2022—more than double the 15,000 recorded in 2021. Importantly, 86% of those participants chose in-person programs, underscoring a strong desire to resume face-to-face learning experiences (ICEF Monitor, 2023).

The United States remained a top destination, attracting approximately 22% of Japanese students abroad in 2022, closely followed by Canada (23%) and Australia (17%) (ICEF Monitor, 2023). This near parity with Canada marks a competitive shift, likely influenced by cost, perceived safety, and visa accessibility. Nevertheless, the U.S. continues to appeal because of its diverse programs and English-speaking environment.

A growing number of Japanese students are also opting for short-term and nondegree programs. Many are using 90-day tourist visas to enrol in IEPs, avoiding the cost and complexity of student visas (The PIE News, 2023). This model provides a more flexible and affordable path to international education and lowers psychological and financial barriers for first-time study abroad participants.

Post-COVID Mindset

The pandemic has clearly shaped students' motivations. After prolonged isolation, many Japanese students reported a renewed appreciation for the personal growth, independence, and "freedom" offered by study abroad experiences (Asia Society, 2023). However, reluctance persists—surveys show that over half of Japanese youth aged 13–29 remain disinterested in overseas education (Asia Society, 2023). Nevertheless, those who do study abroad often return with transformative experiences. One student who attended a four-week program in California reflected that she found a unique sense of freedom in the

U.S. that she had not experienced in Japan (Asia Society, 2023). Educators and government agencies are now leveraging alumni testimonials and social media campaigns to amplify these stories and reshape students' mindsets.

JAPAN'S NATIONAL INITIATIVES

The Japanese government has made a bold and unprecedented commitment to revitalizing outbound student mobility. In 2023, the Cabinet Secretariat launched the J-MIRAI Initiative (Japan Mobility and Internationalization), with the ambitious goal of sending 500,000 Japanese students abroad and hosting 400,000 international students in Japan by 2033—more than double the prepandemic level (Asia Society, 2023). Increased funding, tuition waiver agreements, and innovative policy measures support this initiative.

As cost remains one of the main barriers, particularly for studying in the United States, J-MIRAI supports reciprocal tuition exchange agreements, enabling students to pay tuition at their home institutions while studying abroad.

The TOBITATE! (Leap for Tomorrow) The Study Abroad Initiative, originally launched in 2013, supported thousands of students during its first phase (2013–2020). In 2023, the program entered a new phase with the goal of returning to prepandemic outbound numbers by 2027 (Asia Society, 2023). TOBITATE! combines government funding with corporate donations to offer scholarships and mentorship, especially those that target diverse and underserved students.

Several prominent private foundations also play a vital role. The Yanai Tadashi Foundation, the Masason Foundation, and the Recruit Memorial Foundation provide full scholarships to talented Japanese students studying abroad. In 2023, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation launched a major initiative to fund Japanese university women pursuing STEM degrees overseas, addressing both gender imbalance and global talent needs (Asia Society, 2023). These efforts reinforce the idea that international education is a national priority and an investment in future leadership.

U.S.-JAPAN BILATERAL EFFORTS

On the U.S. side, the federal government has actively worked with Japan to rebuild educational exchange as a core component of the bilateral alliance. In 2021, the U.S. and Japan signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) on Education, leading to an annual U.S.-Japan High-Level Policy Dialog on Education (U.S. Embassy Japan, 2023). These dialogs convinced senior officials to

discuss strategies for expanding student mobility, promoting language education, and enhancing institutional cooperation.

By late 2023, both governments were finalizing new agreements to "step up education cooperation," including initiatives to facilitate the mobility of Japanese educators to the U.S. (Kyodo News, 2023). One key outcome was Japan's decision to collaborate with U.S. states to ease licensing and visa processes for Japanese language teachers, a move aimed at reversing the decline of Japanese language programs in the U.S. and strengthening cultural exchange.

A landmark example of bilateral collaboration is the #USJapanStudyAbroad social media campaign, which was jointly launched in November 2022 by the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and the Japanese Embassy in Washington, D.C. The campaign invited current and former exchange students to share their experiences via hashtags such as #USJapanStudyAbroad and #JapanUSStudyAbroad (U.S. Embassy Japan, 2022). Conducted in both English and Japanese, the campaign amplified authentic student voices, created grassroots excitement, and inspired others to pursue international study. High-level political support has also elevated the visibility of educational exchange. In a 2021 joint statement, President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga affirmed that academic exchange is essential to the prosperity of both people. This top-down endorsement, combined with resource deployment and policy reform, has led to a shift from passive decline to proactive recovery.

TOMODACHI and U.S.–Japan Council Programs

The TOMODACHI Initiative, launched in the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, continues to offer robust youth exchange opportunities into the 2020s. Operated by the U.S.-Japan Council with support from the U.S. Embassy Tokyo, TOMODACHI runs various leadership academies, mentorship programs, and STEM-focused exchanges for both Japanese and American students (U.S.-Japan Council, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these programs pivoted to virtual formats, but in-person activities resumed by 2022–2023. The impact of the TOMODACHI is particularly strong in shaping future leaders. For example, the TOMODACHI STEM Women's Leadership and Research Program brings Japanese university women to U.S. research labs and mentorship seminars, whereas the TOMODACHI High School Women's Leadership Program immerses students from Tohoku in American university life.

In 2024, the U.S.-Japan Council launched the Mineta Ambassadors Program (MAP)—an endowed initiative supporting reciprocal high school and college exchanges. Unlike most individual scholarships, the MAP provides grants directly to institutions and nonprofit organizations to develop sustainable exchange models (U.S.-Japan Council, 2023). Its pilot phase supports institutional capacity building, and alumni join TOMODACHI's broader mentorship community.

Japan Outreach Initiative

One long-standing example of grassroots cultural diplomacy is the Japan Outreach Initiative (JOI), a cultural exchange program co-administered by the Japan Foundation and the Laurasia Institution. JOI places volunteer coordinators from Japan in underrepresented regions of the United States for two-year terms (Japan Foundation, 2023). These coordinators work with schools, libraries, civic organizations, and universities to organize cultural events, teach introductory Japanese, and raise awareness about Japan.

While not directly focused on academic exchange, JOI has indirect but meaningful spillover effects. Coordinators often become a bridge between Japanese and American communities, inspiring local students to study Japanese or consider visiting Japan. Their presence also makes it easier for institutions to host Japanese students or initiate sister–school relationships. The JOI model thus strengthens the infrastructure for future academic mobility in both directions.

CONCLUSIONS

Japan's ambitious goal of sending 500,000 students abroad by 2033 signals a bold commitment to internationalization. Paired with the near-90% recovery of intensive English program (IEP) enrollment in the U.S. and the increasing flexibility of academic offerings, the outlook for U.S.–Japan's academic exchange is more optimistic than it has been in recent decades (The PIE News, 2023).

This renewed momentum is not simply a return to prepandemic norms but a transformation in approach. Between 2021 and 2023, Japanese student enrollment in the U.S. began to rebound, fueled by strategic government investments, innovative institutional partnerships, and a reinvigorated cultural push toward global engagement. New strategies emphasizing affordability, career alignment, cultural responsiveness, and student safety are reshaping the mobility landscape.

As Japanese students rediscover the academic, personal, and professional benefits of studying in the U.S.—whether through short-term programs, English language studies, or full-degree pathways—they are also reshaping national perceptions of international education. If American universities continue to distinguish themselves through academic excellence, career-focused programming, affordability, and cultural awareness—and if Japan's outbound goals are matched by reciprocal institutional innovation—the 2030s may very well mark a renaissance in U.S.–Japan educational relations.

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Chapter Nine

Mexican International Students and the Impact of Contemporary U.S. Political Shifts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the experiences of Mexican international students navigating higher education in the United States amid recent shifts in immigration and education policy. Drawing from enrollment data, student testimonials, and institutional responses, the analysis reveals a decline in enrollment, increased bureaucratic challenges, and increasing emotional burdens for students. The chapter offers strategic recommendations for institutions to improve inclusion, advocacy, and support. The findings highlight the crucial need for equity-driven policies to sustain international student diversity and access.

Keywords: Access, equity, higher education, immigration, inclusion, international students, Mexico, polic

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, evolving U.S. political discourse has introduced new complexities and barriers for Mexican nationals aspiring to pursue higher education in the U.S. While challenges affect many international students, those from Mexico experience a unique intersection of geopolitical tensions, cultural misperceptions, and racialized immigration narratives. This chapter explores the policy landscape, social climate, and institutional responses that shape the experiences of Mexican international students. Drawing on real-world enrollment data and student voices, this study offers strategies for inclusive and sustainable international enrollment management.

Background and Political Climate

A shift toward nationalist and protectionist ideologies in U.S. policy has significantly influenced the experiences of international populations, particularly those from Latin America. Public discourse around border security, immigration control, and national identity has intensified, leading to new executive actions and enforcement practices. Although many policies targeted broader immigrant groups, Mexican students often felt the effects most acutely due to the country's proximity to the U.S. and its central role in political rhetoric.

For example, changes in visa policy, increased scrutiny at ports of entry, and heightened uncertainty around immigration enforcement created a sense of instability, even for those entering legally with full documentation (Pierce & Meissner, 2017). The result has been a chilling effect on student mobility from Mexico, driven not only by policy but also by a broader cultural climate of exclusion.

Enrollment Trends: The Numbers Behind the Narrative

Data from the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2021) show that Mexican student enrollment in U.S. institutions rose steadily until 2016, peaking at approximately 16,700 students. However, beginning in 2017, this trend reversed, with a decline of approximately 9% in the following four years. The decline contrasted with steadier trends from other Latin American countries, indicating that factors specific to the U.S.-Mexico context played a role.

Figure 1. Mexican Student Enrollment in U.S. Higher Education (2014–2022)

Enrollment of Mexican Students in U.S. Higher Education (2014–2022)
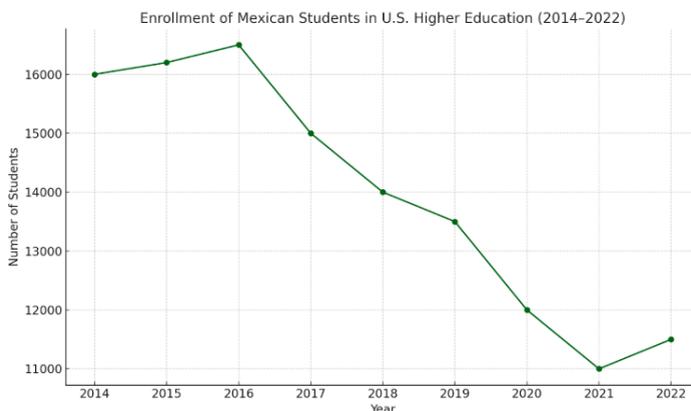
Community colleges, historically a key entry point for Mexican students, reported particularly sharp decreases in enrollment. This may be attributed to financial uncertainty, increased visa complexity, and concerns about safety and acceptance. Even institutions located in states traditionally supportive of international education struggled to counteract national messaging that discouraged cross-border engagement.

Challenges Unique to Mexican International Students

While all international students face challenges in the current climate, Mexican students contend with specific barriers that are both structural and cultural in nature:

Border Politics and Surveillance

The U.S.-Mexico border has become heavily politicized, resulting in increased surveillance and enforcement. Mexican students attending institutions near the border—especially those participating in dual-campus or commuter programs—have reported delays, questioning, and, in some cases, denial of entry despite proper documentation (Massey & Pren, 2012).

Racialization and Misrepresentation

Students of Mexican origin often face assumptions linking them with unauthorized migration or criminal activity perpetuated by media narratives and public discourse. These stereotypes contribute to discriminatory experiences in academic and social settings, diminishing their sense of safety and belonging (Johnson, 2017).

Economic Barriers

Currency fluctuations, increasing tuition, and a decline in public funding for international students have disproportionately affected Mexican families. The weakening of the peso and diminished scholarship pathways have made U.S. education less accessible. Furthermore, policy changes to programs such as DACA and shifts in work authorization rules have increased perceptions of risk for families considering U.S. study options (Gonzales et al., 2019).

Policy Uncertainty

Ambiguous or rapidly changing federal policies related to student visas, optional practical training (OPT), and duration of stay have introduced a new level of unpredictability. These challenges are compounded by negative media coverage and contradictory messaging from different levels of government.

As one student noted, "It felt like the rules could change overnight. Planning my education abroad was like building a house during an earthquake."

Student Voices: Testimonials from the Field

"I came to the U.S. in 2017 to study mechanical engineering. I was excited but scared. Every news report was about immigration enforcement. Even though I had all my documents, I worried every time I went through customs."—Luis M., undergraduate student from Guadalajara, enrolled in a Texas university

"What hurt most wasn't the paperwork—it was when a professor joked about 'building the wall' in front of the class. Everyone laughed. I felt invisible."—Claudia R., PhD student in education, California

"After the election, two of my friends dropped out and returned to Mexico. Their parents were afraid that they would be deported. That fear was real."—Miguel A., community college transfer student, Arizona

These accounts illustrate how political rhetoric, regardless of legality or policy intent, filters into the daily lived experiences of international students.

Institutional Responses and Gaps

Some universities responded to the restrictive and uncertain environment with proactive inclusion, while others struggled due to resource constraints or fear of political backlash.

Promising Institutional Practices

- **Expanded Student Services:** Institutions such as Arizona State University and the University of Texas at El Paso developed bilingual counseling, visa support, and cultural adaptation workshops. These efforts align with broader findings that targeted student support services are key to retention and success for international students (Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014; Andrade & Evans, 2009).

- **Advocacy and Public Statements:** Several universities issued affirmations of support for international students, signaling a commitment to diversity. Public advocacy at the institutional level has been shown to positively impact student belonging and trust (NAFSA, 2020).

- **Scholarship Initiatives:** Some institutions developed financial aid streams or partnerships with Mexican organizations to preserve access, consistent with research emphasizing the role of financial support in sustaining international student pipelines (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

Yet responses remain uneven. Community colleges and smaller liberal arts schools—often without robust international offices—struggled to sustain pipelines (Terrazas-Carrillo & Hong, 2017). Many institutions avoided visible advocacy, fearing accusations of partisanship in politically contentious climates.

Policy Recommendations and Strategic Planning

To rebuild trust and reestablish Mexican student enrollment, institutions should prioritize:

1. **Disaggregated Data Collection** – Move beyond generic categories to capture the Mexican student experience more precisely. Scholars have highlighted the need for nuanced data to inform equity-driven policies in international enrollment management (Institute of International Education, 2021).

2. **Targeted Orientation and Integration** – Tailor orientation, advising, and mentoring to reflect Mexican students' linguistic and cultural realities. Prior research underscores the importance of culturally relevant orientation in improving academic outcomes (Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2015).

3. **Bilateral Partnerships** – Strengthen collaborations with Mexican schools and organizations to create stable pathways. Cross-border academic partnerships have proven effective in mitigating enrollment declines and sustaining mobility (Knight, 2013; González, 2016).

4. **Legal Education and Advocacy** – Partner with nonprofits, legal clinics, and consulates to equip students with accurate information. Legal support has been identified as a critical factor in reducing uncertainty for international students navigating immigration systems (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013).

5. **Faculty and Staff Training** – Provide anti-bias and intercultural competence development. Research confirms that faculty behaviors and microaggressions significantly affect international student persistence and belonging (Lee & Rice, 2007; Yao et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

In an era shaped by nationalism and restrictive immigration policies, Mexican international students have faced unique obstacles: from visa complications and racialized stereotypes to economic insecurity and emotional strain. Yet despite these challenges, students continue to enrich U.S. campuses with their resilience, perspectives, and contributions.

The path forward requires more than symbolic support. Institutions must invest in structural inclusivity, proactive support systems, and cross-border collaborations that affirm Mexican students' rightful place in U.S. higher education. Scholars of international education have emphasized that sustainable internationalization depends on policies that are equity-driven, transparent, and culturally responsive (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Knight, 2013). By centering these values, universities can not only reverse declining enrollment trends but also model global educational diplomacy and reaffirm their role in advancing international understanding.

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Chapter Ten

Leveraging Digital Transformation for International Student Enrollment Growth in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Globally, competition among higher education institutions for international students is increasing. These competitions are the outcomes of observed patterns such as rankings and digital transformation. This chapter explores how the University of Ghana can leverage digital technologies to increase international student enrollment via strategic management theory. This study further examined the factors impeding the growth of international student numbers. These factors included inadequate marketing of programs and a lack of strong international partnerships, resulting in fewer joint programs. The institution's strengths included an established regional reputation, hybrid infrastructure, diverse academic offerings and digitally savvy youth. The findings underscore the importance of a strategic digital approach in positioning the University of Ghana as a competitive destination.

Keywords: digital transformation, international student enrollment, strategic management theory, University of Ghana

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized academic landscape, higher education institutions face increasing competition in attracting students across borders. Digital transformation (DT) is no longer an option, as it represents a critical strategy to increase reach and operational efficiency in recruiting international students. DT encompasses the adoption of technologies such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems, virtual campus experiences, AI-powered marketing, and integrated online platforms. For higher education institutions in the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is a significant opportunity to leverage digital transformation to bridge gaps, overcome infrastructural limitations, and claim a stake in global education. The government of Ghana, for instance, continues to invest in DT to the extent that it has become the exclusive focus of one of its agencies, namely, the Ministry of Communication, Digital Technology and Innovations. Similarly, projects such as the government of Ghana's One Million Coders initiative involve the partnership of higher educational institutions such as the University of Ghana. Such a project has the potential to increase the DT skills of youth and the workforce while making them internationally acceptable.

The University of Ghana (UG) is Ghana's oldest higher education institution and is uniquely positioned to capitalize on this potential. Meeting growing domestic and regional demand, the UG's ongoing digital initiatives such as the "One Student, One Laptop" to needy and brilliant students (Loglo et al, 2024), and the establishment of digital innovation centers, dubbed Hotspot Comfort Zones, lay the groundwork for a more transformative student recruitment model. However, despite these strengths, the UG's current share of international enrollment remains modest. This signals an opportunity to strategically harness DT to propel UG toward its aspirational vision of being a globally impactful, technology-driven, and digitally inclusive higher education institution.

The University of Ghana was founded in 1948 as the University College of the Gold Coast by the British Colonial government (Ofori-Attah, 2006) and underwent a formal name change in the postindependence era to become the University of Ghana. With more than 66,000 undergraduates and approximately 10,000 postgraduate students, the institution has a strong research capacity anchored by institutes such as the Noguchi Medical Research Institute and the expansive Balme Library with over 400,000 volumes and robust digital access services. In July 2024, it unveiled its 2024–2029 strategic plan, which was structured around five pillars: transformative student experience, impactful research, commitment to faculty and staff, engagement and partnerships, and

sustainable research mobilization and stewardship (ug.edu.gh/news/). The key among its ambitions is broadening the global impact via a technology-driven, people-centered approach. This vision aligns with national priorities such as the One Million Coders initiative and Ghana's Digital Ghana agenda championed by the former Vice President, Dr. Bawumia, to promote digital readiness as critical to economic development (Afrane & Akwasi, 2020). Strategic partnerships, for example, reinforce the UG's trajectory toward digital readiness, and collaborations include the UNDP-funded UniPod, a campus innovation hub fostering digital entrepreneurship. The Ministry of Communications, Microsoft and Mastercard Foundation, for example, are focused on developing coding, AI, and maker-space capabilities (Loglo et al, 2024).

According to UG official data, 738 international students out of approximately 66,088 undergraduates constitute approximately 1.1 % of the student body. These international students originate from more than 60 countries, with Nigeria being the most represented (Nyarko & Ephraim, 2016). UG's International Programs Office (IPO), founded in 1997, oversees recruitment and support for visiting, degree-seeking, and English-language students, processing applications year-round for admissions in August/September. This international presence echoes broader patterns, as only 1.17 % of UG's 2020 graduating cohort were international students, which is well below peer global averages (ug.edu.gh/about/enrollment-and-graduation statistics). In 2021, total student enrollment was 61,541, and out of this number, 630 were foreign students, constituting one percent (Facts and Figures, 2021). In contrast, Global North universities enroll hundreds of thousands of international students, whereas other African institutions, such as UG, host fewer than a thousand students. Outreach for international students at the UG is conducted primarily via educational fairs, informal networks, and bilateral partnerships. The IPO operates within resource limitations and receives limited automation support, depending heavily on manual processes and physical presence, rather than digital recruitment methods. Therefore, there is a need for institutions to strategically use digital resources and engagements to increase foreign student enrollment.

Strategic enhancement management (SEM) theory emerged in the 1970s from Boston College in response to declining student enrollment and the need for innovative recruitment strategies in higher education institutions (Smith & Gotthell, 2008). Strategic enhancement management (SEM) uses institutional resources while ensuring both institutional sustainability and student success. Thus, it provides the framework for higher education institutions to operate their enrollment such that both student success and institutional sustainability are achieved. SEM takes into consideration the lifecycle of the student, which ranges

from recruitment, retention, graduation and the building of a lifelong linkage with institutions through the development of an ultimate predisposition with institutional alumni, while the student is recognized as a learner. SEM uses data to understand market shifts, institutional performance and student behaviors to enable informed decision making. In addition, its recruitment strategies are linked to the higher education institution's vision, mission and strategic plan. SEM focuses on recruiting diverse students through strategic marketing and outreach programs while ensuring student retention and experience by providing the requisite academic support services to enhance student success. Using the University of Ghana as a case, this paper explores how this institution can leverage digital transformation to increase international student enrollment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, enrollment management in higher education has undergone a profound transformation, driven mainly by the proliferation of digital technologies. The conventional processes of attracting, admitting, and retaining students have evolved into a data-informed, highly automated system and are particularly significant in international student recruitment. As institutions strive to compete globally, digital tools and technologies have become integral to effective enrollment management strategies. This paper explores various digital solutions ranging from customer relationship management systems to predictive analytics. These are reshaping the way higher education institutions approach student enrollment, with special attention given to their relevance for international student recruitment.

One of the most widely adopted digital innovations in enrollment management is customer relationship management (CRM). The CRM platform, for example, serves as a centralized database that allows institutions to manage vast amounts of student information, automate outreach campaigns, and monitor applicant progression through the enrollment pipeline. According to Hossler and Bontrager (2015), CRM tools are crucial in fostering long-term relationships with prospective students, as they facilitate personalized communication and real-time responsiveness. Huddleston (2019) added that platforms such as the Salesforce Education Cloud, Ellucian, and Slate are particularly effective in tracking international applicants, who often have unique timelines and requirements. These systems not only increase application conversion rates but also allow for more strategic, evidence-based decision-making in recruitment planning (Garrett, 2017).

Closely linked to CRM tools are virtual campus tours and immersive digital content, which offer prospective students, especially those from abroad, a vivid preview of campus life. Institutions are increasingly deploying 360-degree videos, virtual reality (VR) simulations, and interactive maps to compensate for the inability of international students to visit the campus physically. According to Hanover Research (2020), these technologies have become instrumental in building trust and transparency. Straumsheim (2016) reported that universities utilizing immersive tours observed a noticeable uptick in international interest and applications. Similarly, Peruta and Shields (2017) contend that these tools can be tailored to emphasize the elements that matter most to international students, such as dormitory standards, cultural clubs, and safety protocols, thereby strengthening the institution's appeal to a global audience.

Another significant technological development is the use of AI-powered chatbots and intelligent communication platforms. Chatbots such as Ivy.ai, AdmitHub, and Unibuddy are transforming how institutions handle prospective student inquiries. Since they are available on a 24-hour basis, these bots answer frequently asked questions, guide users through application portals, and even schedule interviews or tours. Sharma et al. (2020) noted that AI-enabled chatbots significantly reduce administrative burdens while enhancing the applicant's experience. Similarly, Ahmed and Opoku (2021) reported that these tools are particularly helpful for international students, who may face language barriers or reside in different time zones. The interactivity of these bots allows for the gathering of valuable engagement data, which can be analyzed to refine future marketing and outreach strategies.

In support of decision-making, predictive analytics and data dashboards have emerged as indispensable tools. Higher education institutions now employ algorithms that can forecast application trends, yield rates, and enrollment likelihoods on the basis of historic and real-time data. As Hossler and Bontrager (2015) argue, such tools enable institutions to shift from reactive to proactive recruitment. Using platforms such as Tableau and Power BI, enrollment managers can visualize data on recruitment efforts and make swift adjustments where necessary. Wilkins and Huisman (2011) emphasize that predictive models are particularly helpful in identifying which international applicants are likely to enroll, defer, or drop out, allowing timely intervention and more efficient resource allocation.

Digital marketing is another area where technology plays a transformative role. With the growing prevalence of social media and search engine platforms, universities are now investing in digital marketing campaigns tailored to

international markets. Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) underscore the importance of digital channels such as Google Ads, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn in targeting specific demographics. These platforms allow for microtargeting on the basis of geography, interest, and behavioral data. Perna et al. (2018) suggest that institutions with culturally responsive and engaging online presences are more likely to attract international students. Personalization, once considered a luxury, is now an expectation among applicants seeking transparency and relevance in institutional communication.

Beyond recruitment, integrated online admissions portals streamline the application process for international students, allowing them to upload the required documents, pay application fees, and receive real-time updates. These systems are often integrated with national databases, banking systems, and visa processing platforms to facilitate a seamless user experience (Nguyen et al. 2020). Altbach and Knight (2007) highlight that institutions offering multilingual, mobile-optimized application portals enjoy a competitive edge in reaching international students, particularly those in regions with less robust internet infrastructure. Finally, learning management systems (LMSs), although primarily associated with postenrollment learning, have been found to play a role in recruitment. Platforms such as Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas now support hybrid programs and microcredential offerings that appeal to international students interested in remote learning options. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend, with many higher education institutions incorporating online course previews and sample classes into their marketing strategies. Daniel (2020) noted that the flexibility and accessibility of online education are increasingly influencing student choice. Furthermore, LMS analytics help institutions understand patterns of student engagement, which can inform the design of recruitment and retention strategies.

Overall, the integration of digital tools into enrollment management is redefining the landscape of higher education, particularly in the realm of international student recruitment. From CRMs and virtual tours to predictive analytics and digital marketing, institutions that leverage technology strategically are better positioned to attract, engage, and retain a diverse international student body (Aheto, 2024). These tools not only improve administrative efficiency and applicant satisfaction but also provide a competitive advantage in the global higher education market. As universities, including those in Africa such as the University of Ghana, seek to internationalize their campuses, embracing digital transformation will be essential for sustainable enrollment growth.

CASE STUDIES OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The digital transformation of higher education has emerged as an essential strategy for academic institutions worldwide to increase access, improve operational efficiency, and foster innovation in teaching and learning. In Africa, the process of integrating digital technologies into university operations, particularly enrollment, administration, and pedagogy, has gained momentum in response to global competition, student mobility trends, and the need for inclusive education. Despite infrastructural and financial constraints, many African universities are demonstrating commendable progress in adopting digital solutions. This paper examines selected case studies of digital transformation initiatives in African higher education institutions, highlighting the tools used, challenges encountered, and outcomes realized. This section focuses on the University of Nairobi, Kenya, and the University of Rwanda.

The University of Nairobi (UoN), one of Kenya's largest public higher education institutions, has made strides in digitizing student services and admissions. Through its Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system, the university has linked departments such as admissions, finance, and academic affairs. This system enables real-time updates and efficient coordination between units, reducing redundancies and errors common in manual systems (Muganda & Mutiso, 2021). The UoN's online application portal allows applicants to complete and submit forms, upload credentials, and receive provisional admissions digitally. Furthermore, the institution has invested in e-payment systems, ensuring that students can pay fees online, which is a critical development for international and out-of-county applicants. According to the institution's report, the shift to digital admissions has reduced application processing time by 40% and significantly improved communication between prospective students and the administration (University of Nairobi, 2020). UoN also utilizes e-learning platforms such as Moodle and integrates digital libraries to support students in blended and fully online programs. These systems proved essential during the pandemic lockdown, where over 70% of courses transitioned to online delivery in under two months.

The University of Rwanda represents a unique case where digital transformation is aligned with national policy. As part of Rwanda's broader Vision 2050 and Smart Rwanda Master Plan, the university system has embraced centralized digital systems for administration, enrollment, and e-learning. It uses a unified management information system (MIS) that links student admissions, payrolls, examinations, and alumni records. The adoption of Moodle for online learning has allowed universities to offer short courses and degree programs to international students, especially those from Francophone Africa. This move

aligns with Rwanda's goal to become a regional education hub. Additionally, digital marketing strategies and the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become central to university recruitment campaigns, particularly for reaching youth across continents (Nkusi & Karemera, 2021). Moreover, the University of Rwanda has invested in capacity building for digital literacy, offering training workshops for faculty and students to ensure the effective use of digital platforms. The university's holistic approach, which includes infrastructure, training, policy, and monitoring, makes it one of the most comprehensive digital transformation models in Africa (Mwesigwa, 2020).

INTERNATIONALIZATION POLICY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

As previously indicated, the University of Ghana launched five strategic priorities in July 2024, four of which speak to international student enrollment growth at the University of Ghana. These are as follows: transformative student experience, impactful research, engagement and partnerships and sustainable resource mobilization and stewardship. In addition, the institution has an internationalization policy that drives its commitment. On the basis of its strategic priorities and internationalization policy, international student enrollment could be improved from the current estimated 1% to a desired standard of 10%.

Profile of International Student Applications, 2024--2025

Table 1 indicates the progress of applications by international students at the University of Ghana for the 2024/2025 academic year.

Table 1: Profile of the Applications of International Students, 2024--2025

Status Applications	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
Complete Applications	38(17.2%)	159 (28.9%)	197
Incomplete Applications	184(82.9%)	391(71.1%)	575
Total Applications	222(100%)	550 (100%)	772

At the University of Ghana, enrollment in any program starts with an application process. Data from the International Programs Office for the 2024/2025 academic year indicate that only 197 (26.5%) out of 772 applicants completed their application forms, whereas the remaining 575 (74.5%) did not complete

them. As shown in Table 1, many more (82.9% incomplete applications came from the applicants for the undergraduate programs. Fewer than 30% of the complete applications for postgraduate studies were recorded.

Table 2: Distribution of the Applications of International Students, 2024-2025

S/N	Country	Number of Applicants
1	Nigeria	103
2	South Africa	11
3	U.S. A	11
4	Burkina Faso	10
5	Liberia	8
6	Benin	6
7	Cameroon	5
8	Cote D'Ivoire	5
9	Sierra Leone	5
10	China	4
11	DR. Congo	4
12	Zimbabwe	4

Table 2 shows the distribution of the first 12 out 43 countries where applications came from. It further indicates that most of the international applicants originated from Africa, while others came from the USA and China. It can be deduced from Table 2 that the University of Ghana may not seem to have very strong global visibility to attract enormous enrollments from continents outside Africa compared with universities in North America, Europe, or even South Africa. Digital marketing, international outreach and presence at global education fairs are relatively limited. However, the University of Ghana has the potential to attract many more students from other continents for its undergraduate programs if the strategic enrollment management concept is applied to its international outreach programs. Invariably, it can leverage digital transformation to increase international student enrollment. However, there are factors that inhibit both international student enrollment and institutional sustainability at the University of Ghana. These include inadequate marketing of programs and a lack of strong international partners to run joint degree programs.

Inadequate marketing of programs

While Ghana is an English-speaking country, many University of Ghana's academic programmes are not marketed as attractive or competitive to

international students. Through the strategic enrollment management concept, the University can leverage digital transformation and market its innovative programs such as climate resilience, African studies with global relevance, and public health in low-resource contexts. They can be marketed via digital platforms and niche areas emphasized. Furthermore, application and admissions systems in some higher education institutions can be slow, nontransparent, or difficult to navigate from abroad. Communication lapses, delays in response to queries and a lack of real-time application tracking discourage prospective students. The University of Ghana can leverage these gaps to provide chatbots and toll-free services just for applicants' engagement.

The University of Ghana has relatively few joint degree programs or pathway arrangements with top global universities. In addition, there is strong competition from other African countries, namely, South Africa, Egypt and Morocco. These countries attract a significant share of international students within Africa because of better rankings, established marketing and government investment in internationalization. Despite the aforementioned challenges, UG has strengths that can be leveraged.

STRENGTHS OF UNIVERSITY OF THE GHANA

The strengths of the University of Ghana include an established reputation, English as a medium of instruction, e-Learning, digitally savvy youth, diverse academic offerings and strategic global collaborations.

Established Reputation

The University of Ghana is the oldest higher education institution in Ghana with a strong academic legacy. The preceding narrative could be marketed more aggressively to the international community. In addition, being a member of international networks such as the ARUA, AAU and IAU provides visibility and credibility on the continent and beyond. The logos of these institutions can be visibly displayed on the website and social media platforms of the University. The institution can further use digital platforms to amplify the university's legacy and leadership in Africa through storytelling, academic excellence showcases and global partnerships online.

English as the Medium of Instruction

As an English-speaking institution, the UG is naturally accessible to a global audience, especially those from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. The use of digital campaigns to promote English-taught programmes, especially postgraduate

offerings, with clear course content, delivery modes, and student testimonials can enhance international student enrollment.

E-Learning and Hybrid Infrastructure

The University has made notable investments in e-learning systems such as SAKAI and the College of Education and the Distance Education Directorate have developed frameworks for online and hybrid delivery. These can be marketed by leveraging strategic enrollment management theory. Similarly, marketing hybrid and online programs to international students, especially working professionals, using digital recruitment tools and platforms may be required by the institution. The University of Ghana Directorate of Information Technology Services (DICTS) provides digital backbone services, including internet access, online registration, and digital identity systems. This directorate can build a more robust and integrated digital admissions portal, virtual tours and online program showcases to make the admissions journey seamless for international students.

A Digitally Active Youth Population

The University of Ghana's student population is digitally active, with high usage of social media, mobile technology and online communities. The Digital Youth Village and the Centre for Digital Youth Development are joint flagship projects of both the government and the university. This project can be supported, advertised and resourced to close the digital gap in the university. This higher education institution continues to attract scholars and students across West Africa and increasingly from the rest of Africa and the diaspora. The institution can engage alumni and current students as digital ambassadors on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and LinkedIn to share experiences and attract potential students globally.

Diverse Academic Offerings

The institution offers programs in humanities, education, sciences, business, law, public health, agriculture, among others, many of which have regional or global relevance. Short videos, infographics and student stories can be created for each flagship program, targeting international audiences through digital ads and academic webinars.

Strategic Global Collaborations

Partnerships with institutions in the UK, US, Europe, and Asia, for example, Tallinn University and University of Leeds, support staff, student exchanges and

research collaborations. These partnerships can be further enhanced digitally to promote joint programs, summer schools and exchange opportunities, especially through a revamped international office website and CRM systems.

CONCLUSION

The University of Ghana is well aligned with its five strategic priorities and internationalization policy. Its inability to meet international student enrollment thresholds suggests a combination of institutional strategy, funding for internationalization, national policy gaps and global competition. It is imperative that the University develop an aggressive international marketing strategy, strengthen administrative systems and support services for international students, advocate for visa reforms, invest in partnerships, research visibility and niche programme offerings while keeping strategic enhancement management theory in focus. Invariably, the University can leverage its strengths to increase its international student enrollment numbers. Some of its strengths include academic and historical reputation, existing e-learning capacity, academic diversity and global partnerships. We recommend further studies by exploring the perspectives of international students about UG.

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Chapter Eleven

Empowering Indonesian Students in the Creative Economy: Strategic Insights for a Competitive Future

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia has significant potential in the creative economy, primarily through the involvement of students, who remain an underutilized resource. This paper examines how creative industries contribute to national growth and local development, emphasizing the importance of utilizing student potential. Evaluating recent data on the creative economy and the role of creative industries highlights the critical link between industry development and student participation. The paper argues that collaboration among the government, universities, and entrepreneurs is essential for advancing the sector, particularly through mentorship programs. This approach offers two main benefits: (1) enhancing the quality and quantity of local industries and (2) providing students with direct entrepreneurial opportunities. Ultimately, this model creates a holistic network that connects students, communities, and sectors, establishing a foundation for producing, distributing, and marketing creative products.

Keywords: creative industry, economic growth, local development, Indonesian student

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has brought profound changes in education and the labor market, with the creative economy and industries emerging as key drivers of economic growth, job creation, and innovation. Students, as part of the younger generation, represent an untapped resource capable of shaping the future of this sector. However, to effectively contribute, students must develop skills and attitudes aligned with the evolving demands of the modern economy.

While economic growth in many developed nations has stagnated, several Asian countries—including Indonesia—have demonstrated promising upward trends (Aizenman et al., 2015; IMF, 2023). Much of this growth is driven by the rise of the creative industries, which offer substantial opportunities, particularly at the microeconomic level. South Korea, for example, has successfully integrated higher education with cultural exports—such as K-pop and digital media—by implementing strong university-industry linkages through government-funded innovation hubs. These allow students to co-develop digital creative content for international export. Indonesia could adapt such models to improve student engagement in global creative markets. These initiatives enable students to co-develop digital creative content for international markets. Indonesia could adapt such models to strengthen student engagement and expand its presence in global creative markets. Indeed, Indonesia's creative economy has grown by 5.76%, outperforming traditional sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing (Kominfo, 2022).

As Howkins (2001) argues, the creative economy is underpinned by intellectual property laws such as patents and copyrights, which transform individual ideas into public goods and services that generate value. Florida (2004) highlights the importance of fostering a creative climate driven by innovation, where regions with a high concentration of creative workers are more likely to experience economic growth. Similarly, Howkins (2001) and Sachs (2015) stress that individuals who thrive in the creative economy are those who turn ideas into tangible value.

UNESCO (2003) defines the creative industry as creating knowledge, products, and services through original work. UNCTAD (2023) further noted that creative industries are among the most dynamic global sectors, allowing developing countries to expand into high-growth areas. Bocelli and Salerno (2016) emphasize that cultural and creative industries are essential for economic growth spurred by global demand and the new economy, which extends beyond traditional culture to encompass a broad range of cultural goods and services.

Recognizing the strategic importance of the creative economy, the Indonesian government has supported initiatives to foster its growth. Indonesia's diverse cultural heritage and large youth population (43% of the total) provide a strong foundation to drive creative economic development. Government efforts, such as the 2017 Jakarta Fashion Week, highlight Indonesia's growing creative industries (Tabloid Diplomacy, 2017).

In conclusion, students play a pivotal role in the creative economy. They can contribute significantly to Indonesia's economic prosperity by providing the right mentorship and training. Collaboration among educational institutions, the government, and the private sector is crucial to harnessing their full potential.

GOVERNMENT POLICY IN DEVELOPING INDONESIA'S CREATIVE ECONOMY

Indonesia is experiencing a transformative era, distinct from its previous period, marked mainly by the active involvement of nongovernmental actors in macroeconomic discussions and decisions. This new era has led to the emergence of creative zones driven by innovative networks and collaboration. In this context, the key actors within these zones must embody what is known as "creative preneurship," which involves individuals armed with world-class creativity, insight, and ethics. This concept highlights the importance of human capital, which is both innovative and ethically grounded and essential for shaping the future of Indonesia's creative economy.

The Indonesian government has recognized the significance of this shift by establishing the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, a governmental body dedicated to nurturing the creative sector. This ministry oversees the creative economic agency (Bekraf), which plays a pivotal role in enhancing the competitiveness of the national creative economy and driving overall economic growth. Bekraf's primary responsibility is to catalyze creative industries, ensuring that Indonesia's creative economy becomes a dynamic force in the global market (Kominfo, 2022).

In a statement regarding the development of creative industries, the Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs acknowledged a critical challenge: the number of young entrepreneurs in Indonesia remains disproportionately low compared with the country's population. This observation underscores universities' need to foster entrepreneurship, cultivate a creative economy for students, and create sustainable business models. If creative entrepreneurs and innovations increase, accompanied by an increase in investments, Indonesia's economic growth will

continue to soar, with projections indicating that the country's per capita income could reach USD 16,000 by 2025.

An evolving model for creative economy development has also emerged within government discourse. Traditionally, the triple-helix model, which emphasizes synergy between the government, private sector, and academia, has been employed in advancing the creative economy. However, the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy now advocates for a more inclusive approach, transitioning from the triple-helix model to a quad-helix model. The quad-helix model incorporates an additional layer, bringing together government, academia, the private sector, and the community. This model emphasizes the importance of building collaborations that are not limited to institutional actors but also include the broader community of creatives (Kominfo, 2022).

THE POTENTIAL OF UNIVERSITIES IN SHAPING THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Students play a pivotal role in Indonesia's creative economy, especially in the context of digitalization and globalization. As future leaders and active agents of change, their participation in campus and community initiatives significantly contributes to technological progress and entrepreneurial innovation (UNESCO, 2021). To fully realize this potential, students must be equipped with core 21st-century competencies—namely, critical thinking, creativity, digital literacy, and collaboration—essential for success in a dynamic and interconnected global environment (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Educational institutions are responsible for cultivating these skills through targeted programs and supportive policies. Universities should integrate entrepreneurship, internships, and experiential learning into their curricula to ensure that students can apply theoretical insights in practical contexts (Kolb, 1984). Participation in extracurricular activities and community-based projects further enhances students' personal growth and professional readiness while fostering networks vital to their future careers (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

As of 2023, Indonesia has 4,504 higher education institutions, serving approximately 7.5 million students, with 250,000 lecturers. Universities should implement internationalised entrepreneurship programs, provide access to global creative networks, and establish creative economy observatories that track global trends for local adaptation. Collaborations between Indonesian creative startups and global platforms such as Etsy or Behance have enabled student entrepreneurs to access global markets, highlighting the importance of international exposure

in creative education. Participation in competitions such as Red Dot Design or Cannes Lions can give students visibility on the world stage. Indonesia's model of integrating creative economy principles into higher education provides valuable insights for other emerging economies seeking to harness youth creativity for inclusive.

The educational system in Indonesia thus represents a valuable resource for the nation's economic development. Students represent a significant demographic of productive individuals, possessing untapped potential for fostering job creation and entrepreneurship. If appropriately leveraged, this potential can help mitigate future unemployment rates, with students contributing to both the creative economy and job creation.

While many students graduate to seek employment, few pursue entrepreneurial ventures during college. Ideally, students should begin their entrepreneurial journey while still at university, allowing them to establish and develop creative businesses by the time they graduate. However, a common barrier to entrepreneurship among students is the fear of failure. Unfortunately, few students receive guidance, encouragement, or resources to overcome this fear and embark on their entrepreneurial endeavors. This is where the role of the government becomes critical, as it must create policies that foster an entrepreneurial spirit within the student body, reforming curricula to incorporate creative economic strategies for students.

Furthermore, the government must collaborate with universities and entrepreneurs to shape creative economy policies. This collaboration ensures that universities, markets, and the government work together from the outset to develop a "future strategic plan" for the creative economy. Such a plan should encompass short- and long-term goals, with clear and measurable objectives for student involvement in creative industries. Once a strategic plan is in place, the government must also provide the necessary infrastructure, including legal protection for creative products and access to funding and resources for entrepreneurial ventures.

CREATIVE ECONOMY LEARNING STRATEGIES

Innovation and creativity across disciplines require more than just inspiration and ideas—they demand preparation, incubation, and real-world application. In fields such as art and engineering, student creativity can be fully developed only when learning integrates theory and hands-on practice (Kolb, 1984). Without practical engagement, students risk becoming proficient in abstract discourse

while lacking the skills to operate effectively in real-life contexts (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Therefore, university curricula must be intentionally designed to include practicum components that enable students to test, apply, and refine their ideas within creative and entrepreneurial settings.

Effective learning strategies for creative industries should follow a structured approach. The process can be outlined as follows:

Entrepreneurship and creative preneurship courses: These courses should be introduced to students by the third semester of their studies, allowing them to adjust to the campus's sociocultural environment. The curriculum should span six months, focusing on helping students develop business plans for potential creative ventures aligned with their talents and interests.

Feasibility Testing: A feasibility test team should evaluate the students' business plans to assess their viability. This stage helps identify projects that can move forward into the next phase of business development.

Initial Trial Phase: Once a business plan is deemed feasible, students receive startup capital from universities, the government, or other stakeholders. The implementation's first phase lasts six months and is accompanied by intensive mentorship and supervision to ensure the venture's success.

Evaluation: After six months, students' progress will be evaluated on the basis of specific criteria, such as financial performance, innovation, and market impact. Students who meet or exceed expectations are eligible for additional capital to expand their business activities. Conversely, students who fail to achieve satisfactory results are given a second chance for improvement.

This strategic, phased approach allows students to develop their entrepreneurial and creative industry capabilities. By providing them with the resources, mentorship, and real-world experience necessary to thrive, the Indonesian government and higher education institutions can ensure that students play an active and productive role in shaping the nation's creative economy.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the competition between Indonesia and its neighboring countries in the industrial sector has become increasingly intense, especially with the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. This heightened competition, however, should not be viewed as a challenge but as an opportunity that can propel Indonesia's creative industries to greater heights by

fostering innovation and creativity. The creative economy offers vast potential to contribute to national development, particularly through the active involvement of students, who represent an underutilized yet valuable workforce capable of driving this transformation.

Indonesia is home to a rich tapestry of craft industries, many of which are deeply rooted in local traditions. These industries, however, often face challenges in scaling up due to their traditional management practices and the lack of robust governmental support. One area with significant promise for expansion is the development of cultural heritage-based handicrafts, such as batik, which are practiced across various regions of Indonesia, each with its distinctive design. The widespread distribution of batik across the country offers an opportunity to unite stakeholders—local artisans, students, entrepreneurs (such as exporters), and government bodies—into a collaborative ecosystem that drives innovation and economic growth.

For students, engaging in the creative economy involves more than just participating in traditional business models; it encompasses creating products and services rooted in cultural heritage, artistic expression, and design innovation. This process requires the involvement of students, creative professionals, and companies that help refine and bring student ideas to life, transforming original concepts into market-ready industrial products. Moreover, students' work can gain visibility through platforms such as museums, art galleries, and theatres, which serve as spaces for showcasing their talents. Thus, the creative economy for students is not only about producing creative works but also about ensuring that these works reach the market with proper industry support and capital investment.

A key element in maximizing the role of students in the creative economy is fostering strong collaborations between students, educational institutions, and the industry sector. This collaboration can take various forms, such as internship programs, joint projects, and training initiatives, that bridge the gap between academic theory and practical application. Such partnerships will enable students to acquire the skills needed to navigate an ever-evolving job market while ensuring that they contribute to the sector's growth and development.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of students' active participation in the creative economy as a critical factor in driving social and technological progress. By equipping students with the right skills and providing the necessary support, they can become key contributors to Indonesia's creative industries, helping the nation adapt to the changing global landscape and

capitalize on emerging opportunities. With the right resources and guidance, students are well positioned to be at the forefront of Indonesia's creative economy, transforming ideas into tangible, high-value products and services that will shape the country's future growth.

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Chapter Twelve

Democracy in Practice: Challenges from Teaching, Research, and Student Inclusion in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the dilemmas of aspiring to democracy in education and research, focusing on how inclusion, access, and equity shape student experiences in Brazil. Using an autoethnographic methodology, the analysis draws from two decades of teaching and research at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, where programs such as the Vocational Scientific Program (Provoc) and the Work, Science, and Culture Project (PTCC) have introduced high school students from diverse backgrounds to scientific research. Intercultural education provides the guiding framework, emphasizing recognition of difference and negotiation across class, race, gender, religion, and nationality. These dilemmas—ranging from inequities in digital learning to the unequal status of formal and informal education—highlight how democratic practices in local contexts intersect with broader global concerns of equity and enrollment. The chapter underscores the need to expand educational opportunities that not only prepare students for academic success but also inform inclusive strategies for international student enrollment.

Keywords: democracy, equity, intercultural education, student access, enrollment

INTRODUCTION

An intercultural educational proposal that values diversity must consider the needs of learners from all social, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Sousa, 2004). My reflections are grounded in two decades of teaching undergraduate and graduate students and conducting research with students, alumni, and research assistants at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) in Rio de Janeiro. Through initiatives such as the Vocational Scientific Program (Provoc) and the Work, Science, and Culture Project (PTCC), students from public and private high schools across the city have been introduced to laboratory research and collaborative academic practices.

These experiences reveal dilemmas that extend beyond local educational systems to the broader global discussion on access and enrollment. Issues such as inequality in digital learning, the interplay between formal and informal education, and the hierarchical organization of research environments demonstrate the persistent challenge of creating democratic spaces for all students. As international higher education continues to grapple with questions of who gains access to mobility opportunities, the Brazilian case provides insights into how democratic practices in education and research can inform inclusive approaches to international student enrollment.

THEORICAL FUNDAMENTATION

Owing to Brazilian social inequalities, it is necessary to highlight the importance of scientific research in a scenario where the construction of knowledge and professional training are modulated by the social class to which an individual belongs. Increasing social capital is one way to promote the social inclusion of young people (Abromovay et al., 2002). Students who take part in formal and nonformal educational programs may become more socially included, particularly the most vulnerable.

As a professor and researcher, I am inspired by Tradifi and Moscoso (2018) as a reflexive professional and have few observations. The first is that it is more difficult to understand context when the experience is remote. The interactions that occur among myself and students do work well, but not as if we were present, in immersion. There are codes that are not perceived on a screen by the actors involved. We are limited in our abilities to interpret nuances of languages and culture. The second dilemma is that informal education plays an enormous role in digital society. This is a dilemma of potential status change because formal education has traditionally been associated with more status, privilege,

and power than nonformal and informal education. The third dilemma is the charm with digital technology by the assumption that everything will be solved more easily with it, and this is not necessary. Despite these dilemmas, I see advantages and recognize how students achieve several goals when interacting in a digital society. They find or create groups to solve their educational problems; they disseminate academic and professional opportunities, such as scholarships, grants, internships, and jobs; and they share aspirations and tips for living and studying abroad, which means that the role model figure of a professor is not the only one available. Therefore, to foster democracy in digital education, the main question concerns equality. Typically, the most advantaged students have the best opportunities in educational experiences, because they usually have more resources than their counterparts do to use them well.

Notably, many students bridge the gap from one social class to another when they are participating in diverse groups, particularly if the interactions are in presence. Both Provoc and the PTCC allow students to expand their social networks and build bonds with individuals from various social groups, in addition to their families and schools. These programs promote access to educational scientific strategies for many young people, and they result in augmented social capital through symbolic incentives and concrete material achievements that students may gain through interactions with program coordinators, advisors, and all members of different research groups. Moreover, as a professor, in classroom encounters, I recognize that diversity in educational strategies may lead to more learning among students because of human variations. Additionally, this variation in learning also relates to the different reasons why students pursue a course of study.

With respect to human interactions, the complexity intensifies. In addition to my role as a professor trying to foster good interactions, the diversity of the students' body personalities, cultural upbringings, and social contexts contribute to the course of networks formed. Because all these conditionalities are viewed in hierarchical ways, it is indeed difficult to promote democracy and give voice to the Other. Meruane (2023), in her book, defended the idea of paradoxes of empathy and that we do not have to rely on the feeling of empathy but rather on the fairness of each revindication. However, many times, this dilemma can be extreme in the face of the high degree of diversity among the student body. This requires the task of understanding the identity and territory belonging to all students, which is increasingly difficult in institutions that have people from many walks in life. Moreover, in research practice, another dilemma I face is that although I try to do all efforts to give voice to people interviewed, namely, students and alumni in interviews, many of the institutional hierarchical procedures do

not make it possible to give research assistants the same level of autonomy as I hold. Nevertheless, I try to follow Dewey's inspiring ideas on education and democracy with the following argument: "A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence, a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures" (p.211).

Therefore, despite the odds of fostering interculturality in educational programs and research activities, it is necessary to promote values and practices of equality. This investment depends not only on the access of students to educational programs or research assistants to projects, but also on how the experience is carried out, whether it is democratic for the participants or not and when it is not democratic, allowing all to learn the concrete barriers that inhibit freedom.

METHODOLOGY

On the basis of giving voices to students and alumni, three qualitative studies were carried out with Provoc and another one study with both Provoc and PTCC alumni. The first, carried out between 2005 and 2006: "Scientific vocation and professional project: analysis of the trajectory of high school students at Oswald Cruz Foundation" (Sousa, 2007), prioritized the analysis of the program by the students involved, evaluating to what extent the inclusion of Provoc's students influences the formulation of their professional projects.

The second study, called "Gender and scientific initiation: seeking to understand the female predominance in the Scientific Vocation Program" (Sousa et al., 2008), investigated the students' perceptions of greater female participation in Provoc.

The third study, conducted between 2007 and 2011, was called "Scientific vocation and profession: analysis of the professional trajectory of alumni of the Scientific Vocation Program of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation" analyzes how the experience at Provoc contributes to the choices made by alumni in their academic and professional lives (Sousa, 2010; Sousa & Filipecki 2017).

The fourth, carried out between 2022 and 2025, named "Building trajectories: an analysis of continuities and changes in the trajectory of alumni of Scientific Initiation from Provoc and PTCC at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation" reviewed trajectories through online interviews and questionnaires with alumni of both programs (Sousa, 2025). These studies of the trajectories of students and alumni emphasized the following themes: scientific vocation, professional interests, choices, and academic and professional paths.

The research methodology used in the four projects is qualitative because it is appropriate for understanding the process. The accounts of young students and alumni reveal strategies, values, associations of motives and expectations. The importance of understanding the perspective of these individuals is central to the formulation of public policies aimed at youth.

The data for these projects were collected through individual interviews and questionnaires. Only in the gender project was a group used. The research instruments had a semistructured format, with open and closed questions. In the case of the two projects involving adolescent students, it was necessary to obtain, in addition to informed consent from the students, consent from their parents or guardians to participate in the research. Since the alumni were adults, the informed consent form was requested only from them. All studies were approved by the Fiocruz Ethics Committee.

The content analysis of the interviews prioritized the students' and alumni's points of view. The choice of content analysis is appropriate because it works with communication and is useful for investigating factors that allow inferences about a reality other than that of the message itself (Bardin, 1977). In the content analysis, the use of thematic categories was chosen because it is the oldest, quickest, and most effective technique to apply to direct speeches.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first project, seven boys and eight girls were interviewed, which means that proportionally, boys participated more in the interviews, since there were more girls than boys, participating in Provoc in both stages. The interviewees were between 16 and 17 years old, except for three adults (two boys and one girl). Among the total number of interviewees, the majority attended seven public schools, with the exception of two who were students in private schools. The fifteen interviews conducted in the Provoc-Advanced stage, specifically on scientific vocation and professional projects, reveal the surprising ability of most students to critically analyze their choices and allow us to affirm that Provoc contributes positively to many students awakening their scientific vocations, developing the social skills necessary for professional activities and making professional choices through practice. The target audience for the third research project was former students who completed their time at Provoc between 2001 and 2007. The interviewees were between 19 and 26 years old. In total, 34 participants were interviewed individually. In this research, most of the interviewees continued their scientific activities. Many of them remained in the same laboratory at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, where they were high school

students, which means that their experiences in the same activity continued during their undergraduate studies. In the fourth research, thirteen respondents, nine females and four males were interviewed, demonstrating almost 70% female predominance. With respect to the questionnaire responses of the thirty-one alumni, among the ten PTCCs in the curricular educational program, eight were females and two were males. Among the twenty-one students from Provoc, thirteen were females and eight were males. Among the questionnaire responses, almost 70% of the respondents were female.

As a result of the Provoc and PTCC, students have developed in several areas: more informed choices of undergraduate careers, the development of a critical sense of science and technology, confidence in science and an increased capacity for dialogue between different groups in society. Many were very reassured by having gained contact with researchers. The results indicate that many students and alumni see that they gained autonomy not only in research, but also as individuals who were allowed to travel and present their paper with their counterparts as part of their initial engagement in academic careers.

CONCLUSIONS

Education and research become truly intercultural when interactions among researchers, assistants, and students are reciprocal and inclusive. Such reciprocity is essential for building pedagogical and research environments that welcome learners from diverse social and cultural contexts. By fostering dialogue and mutual understanding across differences of class, race, nationality, and background, educational institutions can create more democratic approaches to science and technology. These practices not only benefit local students but also have direct implications for international student enrollment. When institutions embrace intercultural and democratic principles, they become more attractive to students seeking inclusive and equitable environments abroad. In this way, the Brazilian experiences described in this chapter provide valuable lessons for global higher education: strengthening dialogue, respecting diversity, and ensuring equity are key strategies for expanding access and supporting the success of international students.

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Chapter Thirteen

Emerging Trends and Adaptive Strategies in International Student Enrollment: Regional Insights and Institutional Responses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the rapidly evolving landscape of international student enrollment, shaped by geopolitical tensions, shifting immigration policies, and technological transformation. Drawing on region-specific case studies and current policy developments, it highlights how countries such as Canada, the UK, Japan, and Malaysia are adapting to new mobility patterns and expanding their global reach. It also explores emerging markets—including Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America—as key areas for future growth. The chapter presents adaptive institutional strategies to help universities respond to ongoing disruptions, including digital recruitment, data-informed outreach, policy navigation frameworks, and cross-border academic partnerships. Emphasizing sustainable and inclusive internationalization, it offers actionable recommendations for higher education leaders to build resilient, student-centered enrollment models in a competitive global environment.

Keywords: Digital tools, Emerging markets, Ethical recruitment, Flexible programs, International student mobility, Post-COVID strategies, Scenario planning, Student support services

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of international student enrollment has entered a period of unprecedented change (Park et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025). Recent geopolitical tensions (Mok et al., 2024), policy shifts (Fidler et al., 2023), and technological advances (Abulibdeh et al., 2025) are reshaping mobility flows and altering how universities engage with prospective students. Institutions must adapt swiftly to evolving patterns in student decision-making, which are increasingly influenced by economic uncertainties and the intensifying global competition for top talent (Huang et al., 2024). This chapter explores major shifts in international student enrollment, focusing on region-specific insights and practical institutional responses. By examining policy changes, technological innovation, and market competition, this analysis provides higher education leaders with actionable strategies to build resilient and student-centered enrollment models. Grounded in data-driven insights, this chapter aims to guide international enrollment professionals in navigating these complex and dynamic changes while emphasizing ethical, sustainable practices.

GEOPOLITICAL AND POLICY CHANGES

Geopolitical tensions and evolving policy landscapes are fundamentally reshaping international student mobility. In the United States, policy updates such as changes to the Optional Practical Training (OPT) program and ongoing debates around visa restrictions have created uncertainty among prospective students (Li et al., 2025). For instance, under the Trump administration, measures included suspending the issuance of new visas and halting visa interviews, targeted actions against Chinese students, and institution-specific visa restrictions. In May 2025, the State Department halted the scheduling of new visa interviews for F, M, and J applicants, citing the need for expanded social media vetting. This pause created uncertainty for prospective international students planning to commence studies in the U.S. The administration also intensified scrutiny of Chinese nationals, revoking visas for students and researchers allegedly affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party or involved in sensitive fields (Nakashima, 2025). This move, justified on national security grounds, led to concerns about discrimination and the potential erosion of academic collaboration. Lastly, the administration also imposed institution-specific restrictions, exemplified by the suspension of new international student entry at Harvard University for at least six months and the

consideration of revoking visas for current students (Anderson, 2025; "Illegal step," 2025).

Meanwhile, East Asian countries' efforts to recover from pandemic-related border closures have prompted a recalibration of immigration policies and incentives to attract students back to campus (Park et al., 2025). The pandemic emphasized the importance of regional cooperation, leading to a surge in initiatives for joint research and dual-degree programs within East Asia (El Masri, & Sabzalieva, 2020). Governments in East Asia have also adjusted their higher education policies to boost national resilience and autonomy, including investments in domestic research capabilities and digital infrastructure, aiming to make their higher education systems more self-sufficient (Cui, 2021). Lastly, institutions and governments are reassessing international student policies to provide more balanced and sustainable recruitment strategies, considering the vulnerability of relying heavily on certain sending countries (Choi et al., 2021). There's also a cautious approach to reopening borders and managing inbound and outbound mobility to mitigate future disruptions (Park et al., 2025).

Canada has emerged as a significant beneficiary of these shifts. With a reputation for stability and a clear post-graduation work pathway, Canadian institutions have seen record levels of international student enrollment (Huang et al., 2024). In the UK, the introduction of the Graduate Route visa has significantly boosted interest among students seeking post-study employment opportunities (Hillman, 2024). Emerging markets are also shaping new patterns of mobility (OECD, 2022). Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America are no longer peripheral players in global recruitment. Institutions increasingly view these regions as critical to diversifying their enrollment base and reducing reliance on traditional sending countries such as China and India (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024).

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Asia-Pacific

In the Asia-Pacific region, emerging education hubs such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan are challenging the dominance of traditional Western destinations. Malaysia, for instance, has invested heavily in its transnational education sector, attracting partnerships with UK and Australian universities to establish branch campuses and dual-degree pathways (Hou et al., 2018).

Japan, traditionally seen as a less popular destination, has launched initiatives to expand English-taught programs and foster greater international collaboration (Rees, 2024). Global 30 Project was launched by the Japanese Ministry of

Education (MEXT) to attract foreign students, funding select universities to offer undergraduate and graduate programs fully in English, establish overseas recruitment offices, bolster student support, and strengthen international partnerships (Burgess et al., 2010). The successor to Global 30, top global university project (TGUP) by MEXT has supported 37 universities with funding to hire international faculty, expand English-medium courses, and increase international student and research collaboration (Shimmi & Yonezawa, 2015). MEXT has introduced other programs such as the "Go global Japan" and "Re-inventing Japan" initiatives alongside TGUP, all aimed at growing English-based instruction and fostering global human capital through dual-degree pathways, exchange networks, and broader academic partnerships. These efforts have been designed to position Japan as a viable alternative to Western study destinations, especially for students in Southeast Asia.

North America

Canada's international education sector has experienced significant growth, largely driven by favorable immigration policies such as the Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) program, which enables international graduates to obtain valuable work experience within the country (Legusov et al., 2023). These policy frameworks have enhanced Canada's appeal as a study destination, particularly among students from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, who view the opportunity for post-study employment and potential pathways to permanent residency as major incentives (Huang et al., 2024).

In the United States, institutions are leveraging digital platforms and advanced analytics to counter declines in enrollment from key markets like China (Bamberger et al., 2020; Hsueh, 2018). International student recruitment has shifted from traditional in-person and print methods to incorporating digital technologies like social media marketing, online chat, and data analytics to reach prospective students worldwide (Hsueh, 2018). Universities increasingly deploy data-driven, targeted campaigns on platforms (e.g., WeChat, Facebook) to craft personalized digital profiles and recruitment offers tailored to Chinese and other international markets (Bamberger et al., 2020). Such initiatives have been found to diversify its enrollment pool and provide a more affordable entry point for students (Rickert, 2025).

Europe and the UK

Europe's international enrollment landscape is evolving in the wake of Brexit (Clifton Sprigg et al., 2025). The UK has responded by expanding recruitment

efforts beyond Europe, targeting emerging markets such as Nigeria, Vietnam, and Colombia (Universities UK International, 2021). The Graduate Route visa has also bolstered the UK's appeal by providing a clear pathway to post-study employment (Ahmed & Davies, 2024). Germany and France are similarly focusing on diversifying their international student populations by strengthening ties with African and Latin American universities through dual-degree programs and research collaborations (Adick, 2019; Bitschnau, 2023).

ADAPTIVE INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

In response to the evolving global landscape of international student mobility, institutions must adopt flexible, data-informed, and ethically grounded strategies to sustain and diversify their enrollment pipelines. The following adaptive approaches are derived from region-specific trends, geopolitical shifts, and policy developments outlined in this chapter.

1. Diversify Recruitment Markets through Regional Intelligence

Institutions should prioritize diversification beyond traditional sending countries such as China and India by investing in targeted recruitment strategies across Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Universities UK International, 2021). Strategic partnerships with regional institutions—such as dual-degree programs and research collaborations in Africa and Latin America—can enhance visibility and reduce overreliance on a single market (Adick, 2019; Bitschnau, 2023).

2. Leverage Technology and Analytics for Precision Outreach

The shift toward digital recruitment must be supported by robust analytics infrastructure. Universities should integrate CRM systems, predictive modeling, and social media analytics to identify high-potential markets and personalize outreach (Bamberger et al., 2020; Hsueh, 2018). Institutions in the U.S., for example, are already using WeChat and Facebook campaigns tailored for specific audiences and offering replicable models for others facing enrollment declines from traditional markets (Rickert, 2025).

3. Develop Resilient Policy Navigation Frameworks

Geopolitical volatility—exemplified by U.S. visa restrictions and Brexit-related disruptions—necessitates that institutions build adaptive frameworks to navigate policy risk (Anderson, 2025; Clifton-Sprigg et al., 2025). Such frameworks may include scenario planning, risk assessment of target regions, and proactive

policy advocacy to mitigate the impact of sudden regulatory shifts on student mobility. In doing so, institutions should commit to ethical and sustainable enrollment practices by designing inclusive support systems, reducing financial and visa-related barriers, and ensuring equitable access for students from underrepresented regions (Choi et al., 2021; Park et al., 2025).

4. Capitalize on Immigration-Linked Work Pathways

Work opportunities remain a critical factor in students' destination choices. Institutions in countries with favorable immigration policies—such as Canada's PGWP and the UK's Graduate Route—should actively promote these pathways in recruitment messaging and integrate career development services tailored for international graduates (Ahmed & Davies, 2024; Legusov et al., 2023). Institutions in other regions may benefit from lobbying for or designing similar post-study frameworks to remain competitive.

5. Expand Transnational and English-Medium Programs

Models such as Malaysia's transnational education infrastructure and Japan's English-medium degree expansion through the Top Global University Project provide blueprints for scaling accessible international pathways (Hou et al., 2018; Shimmi & Yonezawa, 2015). Institutions can enhance their global reach by establishing offshore campuses, expanding English-taught offerings, and deepening exchange networks—particularly in regions seeking alternatives to Western education hubs.

Recommendations for Practice

To navigate ongoing disruptions in global student mobility, institutions should strengthen engagement with emerging markets through localized strategies, including regional partnerships, dual-degree programs, and joint research initiatives (Adick, 2019; Bitschnau, 2023). Tailored outreach in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America can help diversify enrollment pipelines and reduce dependence on traditional source countries (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Universities UK International, 2021). Investment in data infrastructure is critical. Institutions should expand the use of enrollment analytics, predictive modeling, and targeted digital campaigns to inform recruitment decisions and respond swiftly to market changes (Bamberger et al., 2020; Hsueh, 2018). Embedding post-study employment pathways into recruitment messaging and student support services—particularly in countries like Canada and the UK—can further enhance institutional appeal (Ahmed & Davies, 2024; Legusov et al., 2023). Finally, sustainable internationalization requires inclusive policies and

wraparound supports that provide equitable access and long-term student success, including financial aid models, culturally responsive services, and ethical recruitment practices grounded in long-term partnership building (Choi et al., 2021; Park et al., 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

As global dynamics continue to reshape the international student landscape, higher education institutions must proactively adapt to uncertainty, complexity, and opportunity. The convergence of geopolitical tension, policy volatility, and emerging markets has disrupted long-standing mobility patterns and introduced new imperatives for enrollment management. Institutions that respond with flexible, regionally informed, and ethically grounded strategies—such as market diversification, technological innovation, and partnership development—will be better positioned to attract, support, and retain a globally diverse student body. This chapter has outlined not only the challenges facing international enrollment but also a range of adaptive practices rooted in regional contexts and evidence-based insights. Moving forward, institutions must prioritize resilience, equity, and long-term relationship building in their global engagement efforts. By doing so, they can cultivate more sustainable and inclusive internationalization models that reflect both strategic foresight and a commitment to global educational access.

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Chapter Fourteen

From Home to Host: Challenges and Resilience in Cross-Cultural Transition

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the cross-cultural adaptation of international undergraduate students at a U.S. liberal arts college, highlighting challenges and strategies for successful integration. Grounded in Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses, the study explores students' experiences through qualitative interviews. Key findings reveal barriers such as language difficulties, bureaucratic hurdles, and cultural stereotypes, alongside growth opportunities such as personal development and community engagement. Students employ coping strategies, including social support, cultural connections, and self-advocacy. These insights offer practical implications for enrollment managers and higher education professionals, informing data-driven recruitment, retention, and support strategies. By fostering inclusive environments, institutions can enhance international student success and strengthen long-term enrollment sustainability.

Keywords: Acculturation, Cross-cultural Adaptation, International Students in the US, Small Liberal Arts College, Language Barriers, Coping Strategies

INTRODUCTION

International students face distinct acculturation challenges. These challenges often come from cultural differences, language barriers, social isolation, and differing educational expectations. The outcomes of these challenges depend on the type of higher education institution they attend, particularly when comparing liberal arts colleges to larger, more heterogeneous institutions. Research indicates that liberal arts colleges often provide a more intimate learning environment characterized by low student-to-faculty ratios and close interpersonal interactions, which are crucial for international students adapting to a new culture (An et al., 2016; Shein, 2015). In these settings, the active engagement of faculty and the promotion of intercultural understanding can help mitigate the acculturative stress faced by these students (Heng, 2018; Han et al., 2017).

The transition experience of international students at liberal arts colleges emphasizes the importance of social connectedness and the impact of the campus climate on their overall adjustment (Koo et al., 2021). Studies have shown that international students in liberal arts colleges can benefit from a community that fosters interaction with native students, enhancing their social integration and reducing feelings of isolation (Koo et al., 2021). The tailored support services often found in liberal arts colleges—such as academic advice and individualized tutoring—further help in addressing specific academic and psychological challenges that international students encounter (An et al., 2016). In contrast, students at larger institutions often report a more fragmented experience due to the sheer size and diversity of the student body. This can lead to higher levels of acculturative stress, as students may struggle to find a cohesive community and adequate resources to support their adjustment (Hansen et al., 2018). For example, research indicates that students in larger universities often face more significant cultural disconnection and encounter barriers when seeking help or forming social relationships, which can exacerbate their stress levels (Su et al., 2021).

Additionally, the coping strategies employed by international students can vary significantly between these two types of institutions. While large universities provide extensive academic resources and diverse extracurricular activities, the sheer scale may overwhelm some international students, leading to challenges in navigating the system effectively (Cohen et al., 2020). Additionally, international students in larger institutions might struggle with integration due to the vast diversity of backgrounds represented, which can shift the nature of interactions and relationships (Bicak & Taylor, 2020). This disparity highlights the need for

institutions to develop tailored strategies that cater to the unique environments and challenges posed by their institutional size and structure (Choudaha, 2016).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The adaptation of international undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. involves navigating various cultural, academic, and social environments. This process is often complex and influenced by both psychological and sociocultural factors, as outlined within the frameworks of Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses. Berry's acculturation theory posits that individuals may adopt one of four strategies in the context of cultural adaptation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. The U-Curve/W-Curve models describe the emotional trajectory of individuals as they adjust to a new culture, illustrating initial adjustment difficulties, followed by adaptation and stabilization, and potential readjustment upon returning to one's original culture (Krsmanovic, 2019; (Ramos et al., 2014).

The challenges faced by international students can include language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of alienation, which are critical factors influencing their degree of acculturative stress. Research indicates that a more universal-diverse orientation—reflecting openness to diverse cultural experiences—can significantly alleviate acculturative stress, thereby facilitating smoother adaptation (Yakunina et al., 2013; Yakunina et al., 2013). This aligns with Berry's notion that engagement in an integrative approach fosters successful adaptation. Furthermore, acculturative stress is correlated with various outcomes, including mental health difficulties and overall adjustment to the educational landscape, which can be exacerbated by initial feelings of homesickness, as highlighted in the U-Curve model (Ramos et al., 2014; Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

The implications of cross-cultural adaptation extend beyond individual experiences. Building bridges between domestic and international students through structured and informal activities has proven essential in fostering meaningful interactions and mitigating feelings of isolation (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018). The combination of formal university programming, such as conversation partners, alongside informal social practices encourages a rich cultural exchange that aligns with Berry's integrative pathway for acculturation. This strategy not only enhances the experience of international students but also contributes to the overall diversity and inclusiveness of the college environment (Hanson et al., 2012). Thus, utilizing frameworks such

as Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses provides critical insights into the multifaceted challenges these students face and the support mechanisms available to foster their adjustment and integration.

Present Study and Research Gap. Research shows that the academic satisfaction of international students is influenced by their institutional environment. Gopalan et al. (2019) reported that organizational support is critical for cultural adjustment and overall academic satisfaction among international students. This relevance is especially pronounced in liberal arts colleges, which often prioritize student-centered approaches and provide tailored services to support international students' well-being and academic performance (Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Gopalan et al., 2019). The cross-cultural adaptations of international undergraduate students within small liberal arts colleges present a unique context that reflects both the challenges and opportunities these students encounter during their transition to a new educational and cultural environment. The literature on this subject highlight various dimensions of adaptation, including academic, social, and emotional facets. For example, Park's mixed-methods study illustrates the specific academic adaptations that international students must navigate, particularly in fields that require strong language skills, such as writing courses. This study indicates that students' academic experiences can be significantly affected by language barriers, cultural differences, and teaching styles prevalent in U.S. institutions (Park, 2016). Hence, the current study aims to contribute to the literature by providing rich qualitative data that can inform institutional support mechanisms and interventions for international students.

The cross-cultural adaptation of international students in smaller liberal arts colleges presents a distinctive research gap, particularly compared with other institutional types. This educational context, characterized by smaller class sizes, more intimate student–faculty relationships, and a commitment to holistic education, creates both unique challenges and opportunities for international students during their adaptation process (An et al., 2016). Previous work has focused primarily on broader trends in higher education, often failing to adequately disentangle the specific dynamics and acculturation challenges experienced in small liberal arts colleges compared with larger universities or different educational settings (San & Guo, 2022). The current study raises three research questions, as indicated below, to address a significant gap in the discourse on cross-cultural adaptation and illuminate how different institutional types impact the adaptation experiences of international students, particularly within the small liberal arts sector (Alnajjar & Alacapınar, 2024).

Research Questions

1. What challenges do international students face in adapting to a small liberal arts college?

2. How do international students perceive their cross-cultural adaptation experiences?

3. What coping strategies do international students use for cross-cultural adaptation?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the cross-cultural adaptations of international undergraduate students in a small liberal arts college. By using semi structured interviews, the research aims to capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of these students, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their cultural adjustments, academic experiences, and social integration. This approach emphasizes careful listening and respect for individuals' unique voices and interpretations of life experiences (Ponterotto, 2010). Grounded theory is used as the methodological approach to systematically analyze qualitative data and generate theoretical insights. A "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of acculturation and coping experiences is elicited via such qualitative methods.

Participants

The participants in this study were international undergraduate students enrolled at a small liberal arts college. The participants for this study were selected via purposive sampling. The criteria for selection included being an international undergraduate student currently enrolled at a small liberal arts college in a northeastern American university. Efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants on the basis of nationality, cultural background, gender, and length of time spent at the institution. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to ensure diverse representations of students from various cultural backgrounds, academic disciplines, and years of study. The final sample consisted of 16 students (n=16).

Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was administered to gather basic information such as age, nationality, cultural background, academic program, and length of stay

at the college. This helped in contextualizing the experiences shared during the interviews (see **Table 1** for specific information).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Categories	Details
Gender	(10) females, (5) males, (1) nonbinary
Age Range	18-24 years
Countries of Origin	Germany, Turkey, Croatia, Austria, Haiti, Bangladesh, Ukraine,Kyrgyzstan, Romania, India, France, Honduras, Ireland, Nicaragua
Years in the U.S.	>1-5 years
Academic Majors	Psychology, Business, Engineering, Sociology, Art, Computer Science, Data science, Cybersecurity, Poli Sci, Biochem, Public Health, English, Finance/Marketing, Forensics, hospitality, nursing
Academic Years	Freshman (2), Sophomore (7), Junior (4), Senior (1), Graduate (2)

Interview Questions

The participants engaged in semi-structured interviews, allowing for open-ended discussions about their cross-cultural experiences, challenges, and adaptations. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in capturing their narratives. These interviews provided a platform for participants to narrate their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to cross-cultural adaptation.

Procedure

All the data were collected within the participants' natural settings. The interviews were conducted in a laboratory in the Department of Psychology. Data were collected through semi structured interviews, which are recognized as effective methods for exploring complex phenomena such as cross-cultural adaptations (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was developed on the basis of literature and theoretical frameworks, including Berry's acculturation theory and the U-Curve/W-Curve hypotheses. The guide includes open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the following:

1. Challenges faced in adapting to the new cultural and educational environment.

2. Perceptions of cross-cultural adaptation experiences.

3. Coping strategies employed to manage adaptation challenges.

The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting in person, to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted

approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

The constant comparative method is employed throughout the analysis to compare new data with existing codes and categories, ensuring that the emergent theory is grounded in the data. The audio-recorded interviews are transcribed verbatim and analyzed via grounded theory methodology (Glaser et al., 1968). The analysis process involves several steps:

Open coding: Initial coding of the transcripts to identify key themes and concepts.

Axial Coding: Organizing the initial codes into categories and subcategories to establish relationships between them.

Selective Coding: Integrating and refining categories to develop a cohesive theoretical framework that explains the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of international students.

The collected data, comprising interview transcripts and demographic information, were subjected to thematic analysis. This method involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the qualitative data. Through an iterative process, themes relevant to cross-cultural adaptations among international undergraduate students were identified and organized.

As recommended by Hill (2010) and Hill et al. (2005), we used several methods to establish trustworthiness and reduce researcher bias. First, all the research team members discussed their expectations and biases, which might have influenced their interviews and coding at the beginning of the study. Researchers reported expectations and biases that can allow researchers to identify their own perceptions and interpretations of the data in the analysis. Second, we performed a pilot interview protocol with two to three people who could meet the participation criteria but were not included in the formal study. These pilot interviews allowed researchers to examine whether the interview questions functioned properly and logically. After the pilot interview, we revised a few questions to adjust the sequence of asking questions. Finally, member checking was also involved in our study to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data (Hill et al., 2005). Upon the completion of transcription, we sent them to the participants to check for accuracy.

Prior to participating in the study, the participants were provided with detailed information about the research objectives, procedures, and their rights. Informed

consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring their willingness to take part. All the data collected were treated with strict confidentiality in the primary research advisor's laboratory with a passport protected file. The participants' identities were kept anonymous in the reporting of findings, and pseudonyms or codes were used to protect their privacy.

RESULTS

Challenges in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Language barriers. A recurring theme among participants was the complexity of language adaptation, particularly with respect to informal and practical communication in school. While many students had strong formal English skills, they struggled with slang, idiomatic expressions, and regional accents, which impeded both academic comprehension and social integration. Sarah, from Germany, noted the contrast between textbook proficiency and conversational fluidity: "I thought I spoke proper English... but here, it's like people think a Neanderthal is talking." This disconnect affected her confidence and willingness to engage in peer conversations.

Adam, another participant, echoed this challenge: "There's people who use different slangs or words I'm not familiar with... pop culture wise... it's awkward." Such experiences highlight the isolating effects of linguistic nuance, which extends beyond grammar to the cultural literacy embedded in everyday language. These difficulties, compounded by rapid speech in classrooms, often left students hesitant to ask questions, fearing judgment or misunderstanding.

Navigating bureaucratic systems. The participants described bureaucratic navigation as a persistent source of stress, especially regarding visas, housing, and employment authorization. One of the 16 participants reported, "They need to review our account, so it takes time to go through all these applications. In addition, once it is even completed, you just need to go again and do a ton of paperwork again." This goes to the complexity of unfamiliarity with U.S. administrative systems that make routine tasks—like opening a bank account or filing taxes—confusing and time-consuming. Many recounted instances of missing deadlines or incorrectly filled out forms due to unclear instructions or limited institutional support.

The students expressed frustration with the lack of accessible guidance. Another participant, like Enes, shared how even simple procedures became overwhelming without prior knowledge or support networks, intensifying feelings of disorientation during their initial months on campus. This aspect of

adaptation often intersects with language challenges, further complicating efforts to become self-sufficient.

Discrimination and Stereotypes. Several students recounted instances of microaggressions and subtle discrimination rooted in cultural assumptions. Ahmad described a classroom incident: "I asked her a question... and then she was like, 'Can you hear me? Can you hear me?'—as if I couldn't understand because English isn't my first language." Such encounters reflected an implicit bias, undermining the intellectual capabilities of international students on the basis of their accents or perceived fluency.

Amina, from Eastern Europe, highlighted the issue of national identity erasure: "Most people think Eastern Europe is just Russia. I keep explaining my country's next to Italy... they still say, 'Oh, that's Russia.'" This reduction of cultural identity to simplistic geographic labels frustrated students, making them feel invisible or misrepresented. Stereotypes about economic backwardness or outdated technology also surfaced, contributing to social exclusion and a diminished sense of belonging.

Perceptions of Adaptation

Positive Experiences and Personal Growth. Despite these challenges, many students reflected positively on their adaptation, emphasizing personal development and increased cultural sensitivity. Omar shared that the experience broadened his perspective: "If I ever feel very one-sided, I try to also see the other side of things." Exposure to diverse viewpoints encouraged students to reevaluate assumptions and embrace intercultural understanding.

Yusuf, who identified as Hispanic, articulated a newfound sense of unity: "Back home, I didn't truly think about it... but here, I feel more connected to people I wouldn't have thought about before." The shared experiences of adaptation created solidarity across cultural groups, fostering empathy and mutual respect.

Community Engagement and Belong. Many students found integration through participation in campus events and student organizations. Aslihan highlighted the value of cultural representation: "We put on cultural events... not just Hispanics, but international students too. It made me feel part of the community." These events served as platforms for cultural expression and strengthened students' sense of agency within the academic environment.

Negative Experiences of Isolation. However, the process was not uniformly positive. Several students described initial feelings of alienation, intensified by the

individualistic culture prevalent on campus. Fatima shared, "In class, everyone was completely silent. Back home, people are always helping each other." The contrast between collectivist social norms and perceived emotional distance in the U.S. academic setting often led to loneliness and confusion.

Language-related emotional barriers also emerged. Yunus expressed difficulty in articulating feelings: "I don't know how to express my emotions in English, so I just don't." Musa added, "Even though I'm a junior, sometimes I feel like I'm here all by myself... against the world." Their comments underscore the psychological toll of language barriers on emotional well-being and social connectivity.

Mixed Experiences: Balancing Dual Identities Some students reported ambivalence in maintaining connections with their home culture. Maria admitted, "I don't follow my home culture anymore... it just makes me feel worse, because I can't celebrate it with people from home." This emotional detachment signaled the difficulty of sustaining cultural traditions in an unfamiliar environment, especially when those practices are rooted in community participation.

Coping Strategies

Social Support Systems. Students relied heavily on relationships—both back home and on campus—to navigate their transition. Isra described her routine: "I talk to my friends from home... and my parents, at least for one hour three times a week. That warmth helps." Maintaining these connections offered emotional grounding during stressful periods.

On campus, support from the International Students Office (ISO) was frequently praised. Aisa appreciated the inclusive programming: "ISO was a big thing... meetings and cultural events made me feel integrated." Ahsen emphasized its practical assistance: "They helped me with employment, gave me a tour... answered all my questions." The ISO served as both a resource hub and a culturally safe space.

Maintaining cultural connection. Cultural practices such as cooking, celebrating holidays, or engaging with music from home were common ways to maintain identity. Elizabeth, from Ireland, felt connected due to the university's Irish roots: "Learning about the Mercy Sisters—it's something I've known my whole life." Others, such as Isabella and Ismail, described the emotional comfort of calling home during holidays or receiving symbolic gestures from family members.

Some used sports as a bridge. Omar, who played soccer in Haiti, continued tradition at college, reinforcing a sense of continuity and belonging. However, not all the students found it easy—Hacer acknowledged, "It's hard to stay in touch... everyone's growing apart."

Negotiating Cultural Identity. Balancing integration with cultural preservation emerged as a nuanced challenge. Students selectively adopted elements of the host culture, aligning them with personal values while safeguarding core traditions. This balancing act fostered resilience and intercultural competence, shaping a more complex, globalized identity. Their reflections reveal an ongoing negotiation—not between two static cultures but between evolving selves and contexts.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of international undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the United States. Grounded in Berry's acculturation theory and the U-/W-Curve models, the research aimed to understand (1) the challenges international students face; (2) their perceptions of adaptation; and (3) the coping strategies they employ. Thematic analysis revealed three major domains: significant acculturative stressors (language, bureaucracy, discrimination), the dual nature of adaptation (both enriching and isolating), and a variety of coping mechanisms centered on social connection, cultural continuity, and identity negotiation.

Language barriers as acculturative stress. Language emerged as both a practical barrier and a symbolic barrier. Berry's (1997) framework recognizes language fluency as critical to integration, the acculturation strategy associated with the best psychological outcomes. However, many students in this study encountered obstacles due not only to formal proficiency gaps but also to sociolinguistic challenges—slang, humor, and idiomatic expressions—that hindered social participation. The inability to decode informal communication constrained their perceived competence and fostered a sense of alienation, echoing findings from Yakunina et al. (2013), who noted that difficulties in informal communication predict lower psychological adjustment.

Bureaucracy and the hidden curriculum. Navigating institutional systems—visa applications, banking, and employment—exemplified what many participants experienced as a "hidden curriculum" of life in the U.S. This aligns with Hansen et al. (2018), who reported that bureaucratic stress disproportionately affects students unfamiliar with American administrative

norms. The U-Curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) maps these frustrations onto the "crisis" phase of cultural adjustment, where idealized expectations crash with institutional complexities. The stress of bureaucratic opacity not only delayed practical goals but also signaled a lack of structural accommodation, pushing students toward separation or marginalization in Berry's taxonomy.

Discrimination and Stereotypes: The Cost of Cultural Reductionism. Students' encounters with microaggressions and subtle discrimination illustrate the psychological burden of racialized and regional stereotypes. Being spoken slowly or asked whether they "could hear" conveyed implicit doubts about intelligence and belonging. Such experiences are well-documented sources of minority stress (Sue et al., 2007) and signal symbolic exclusion, where students are present but not perceived as fully legitimate members of the academic community. This results in emotional withdrawal, impairing both social and academic engagement.

Complexity of Perceptions. Consistent with the W-Curve hypothesis, many participants moved beyond the initial confusion to a reflective, integrative attitude. The students described becoming more empathetic, globally aware, and introspective. Talha's reflection—learning to consider alternative perspectives—mirrors the shift from ethnocentric to ethno-relative thinking (Bennett, 1993). Even in contexts of adversity, students draw meaning from their journeys. Their narratives underscore the dialectic of cross-cultural adaptation: simultaneous expansion of self and occasional contraction of confidence.

However, this growth was uneven. Fatima's and Yunus's comments revealed emotional dissonance when local social norms conflict with collectivist expectations. The feeling of being socially invisible or emotionally "lost in translation" emphasizes how cultural distance can be internalized, reinforcing loneliness and self-isolation. These findings reflect Myers-Walls et al. (2011), who noted that emotional expression barriers in a second language compound mental health vulnerabilities in international students.

Coping Strategies: Navigating between Worlds

Social Support and the Buffering Effect. Social support—particularly contact with family and peers—function as a key protective factor. Isa's daily check-ins with her parents show the buffering effect described by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress-coping model. Connecting with conationals also created an in-group solidarity that buffered external microaggressions. This echoes Ra &

Trusty (2015), who reported that international students with strong intragroup ties reported lower levels of homesickness and anxiety.

Cultural continuity and identity negotiation. Cultural rituals, including food, music, and holidays, served not only as nostalgic sympathies but also as anchoring practices that preserved students' sense of continuity. For some—such as Maria—engagement in home culture faded, indicating a possible shift toward assimilation. For others, dual identity was intentionally maintained. This finding supports Berry's (1997) concept of integration as bicultural competence, where individuals successfully navigate both home and host cultures without abandoning either.

Institutional Resources and Self-Advocacy. The role of the International Student Office (ISO) in colleges is particularly vital. Students highlighted ISO staff who personally toured them around campus or helped with job applications. These small, targeted acts—aligned with those of Gopalan et al. (2019)—constitute what Mahmood and Burke (2018) describe as "relational capital": trust-based, personalized institutional support. Their importance cannot be overstated in settings where students often hesitate to seek help owing to cultural norms about independence or self-reliance.

Institutional Implications

International students at liberal arts colleges navigate a complex environment of cultural, academic, and emotional transitions—a complexity between vulnerability and empowerment, alienation and belonging, loss and growth. Their successful adaptation is not solely a testament to personal resilience but also a reflection of institutional structures that either hinder or facilitate inclusion. This study underscores the need for colleges to transition from expecting assimilation to fostering structural responsiveness. Institutions that dismantle barriers, invest in culturally inclusive practices, and amplify student voices are more likely to cultivate globally literate, empathetic academic communities.

Language support must extend beyond academic proficiency to encompass the informal and cultural dimensions of English. Workshops on idioms, slang, and regional expressions can explain social interactions and help students feel anchored in campus life. To counteract subtle forms of cultural reductionism and to offer practical implications for enrollment managers, institutions should prioritize intercultural competence development through reflective bias assessments, faculty cultural humility workshops, and student-led forums. Within this environment, international students can be recognized

as multidimensional individuals, not cultural representatives. Additionally, international offices should offer transparent, multilingual guidance on visas, employment, and housing logistics. Culturally responsive training for staff is essential to ensure that institutional touchpoints become sources of validation rather than alienation.

The liberal arts model—with its emphasis on ethical reasoning and critical inquiry—can further support students in contextualizing their experiences within broader frameworks of personal development and societal engagement (Hill et al., 2012). The path from "home" to "host" is not linear, but it can be enriched through thoughtful, student-centered design.

Research Considerations

While the insights from this study offer valuable implications, their generalizability is limited by the context—a small, northeastern U.S. liberal arts college—and a relatively homogenous sample (n=16). Although analytic rigor was maintained through grounded theory and member checking, cultural nuance and researcher positionality may still shape interpretation. Furthermore, the study's cross-sectional design restricts visibility to the evolving nature of student adaptation over time.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to trace how international students' adaptation processes shift across multiple academic years and identify which institutional interventions yield sustained impacts. Comparative studies across institutional types—urban vs. rural, public vs. private, and large vs. small—could surface environmental variables most predictive of adaptation success. Intervention-based research, especially mixed-method or randomized studies, should evaluate programs such as peer mentoring, culturally immersive events, and hybrid orientations to determine their effectiveness in supporting inclusion, mental well-being, and academic performance. In summary, a broader range of voices is essential to fully understand and enhance the journey of international students navigating complex, often nonlinear, transitions between educational systems and cultural worlds.

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