

India and Global Student Migration in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher education research has increasingly engaged with global dimensions of teaching and research, yet the internationalization of student migration remains underexamined in the Indian context. This study provides a bibliometric review and systematic analysis of publication output on international student migration between 1995 and 2025, drawing on Scopus data. Findings reveal a surge in research over the past decade, alongside the dominance of publications from North America, reflecting intensified student migration and the growing salience of transnational policy agendas. Full-text comprehension of the publications indicates that India is attracting rising share of students from South Asia and Africa, due to affordability and availability of English-medium instruction. Persistent challenges remain around infrastructure, academic integration and development of soft skills. Outbound migration from India, by contrast, continues to be dominated by flows to Anglophone destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. Here students pursue academic prestige, post-study employment and migration pathways. An under-researched dimension of international student migration foregrounds India's consolidation as a regional educational hub, in parallel with the rising prominence of Gulf Cooperation and Southeast Asian host locations. While these destinations offer economic advantages, flexible residency pathways and cultural proximity, their interconnected positioning within India-centered mobility circuits remains undertheorized. The study underscores the shifting geographies of student migration linked to Indian higher education policy.

Keywords: Bibliometric Analysis, Higher Education, India, International Migration, Students, Systematic Comprehension.

Introduction

International student migration is defined as the cross-border movement of students who temporarily relocate to pursue tertiary education outside the country of their origin (1). Such students are increasingly understood not merely as temporary educational visitors, but as regulated migrant actors positioned within national and global labor markets (2). Competition for mobile students has been intensified by universities seeking sources of revenue, research talent and global visibility (3). Within this framework, intergovernmental organizations like Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and rigid ranking systems such as the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World Rankings have been functioning as governance technologies through which institutional strategy is shaped (4, 5). Further, mobility flows are embedded within a stratified higher education landscape where standards of prestige remain anchored in Global North institutions, reinforcing asymmetrical circuits of resource allocation and legitimacy (6).

The effects of these hierarchies on mobility patterns have been illustrated by empirical research from the Global South. In Brazil, state-led initiatives intended to build a globally competitive workforce primarily benefited students from elite backgrounds, while marginalized students faced symbolic violence when their local technical knowledge was devalued in Global North institutions (7). In Sub-Saharan Africa, countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya faced tensions between rapid population growth and limited domestic capacity. Credentials in the Global North were often pursued by students to bypass underfunded domestic systems and access stable educational environments within the Francophone and Anglophone corridors of Europe (8, 9). At the same time, Malaysia has been established as a regional hub in Asia, attracting students from Middle East, South Asia and Africa (10). Within these patterns of differential mobility, India presents a research problem concerning its place in the global knowledge economy.

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Although its historical legacy is associated with trans-regional knowledge exchange through ancient centers such as Takshashila and Nalanda, a fragmented position within academic hierarchies is occupied by contemporary India (11). It has been positioned both as a major exporter of students to Global North destinations and an emerging host destination for students within the Global South (12). Yet, despite this dual role, lower positions in global ranking systems continue to be assigned to Indian universities (13, 14). A striking contradiction is thus produced: although global academic mobility flows are sustained by India actively, symbolic recognition within the very hierarchies they reproduce have remained difficult for its institutions to secure (15).

Research on international student migration involving India has expanded gradually; yet two critical gaps remain. First, the literature is segmented by mobility direction. Studies of outbound Indian student migration are predominantly situated within Western destination contexts and focus on issues such as credential recognition, racialization and migration precarity (16-18). By contrast, research on inbound migration to India is dispersed across policy analysis and institutional strategy, with limited attention to student experiences (19, 20). This division limits the understanding of how India's dual role as both a sending and receiving context shapes international student mobility. Second, existing studies have been heavily reliant on macro-level explanatory models such as push-pull frameworks, which explain mobility through structural drivers (21). While useful for tracing aggregate patterns, such models offer limited insight into the lived and social dimensions of mobility.

These gaps are addressed in the present study. First, an integrated analysis of both inbound and outbound student mobility is undertaken using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 framework, thereby addressing the empirical segmentation that characterizes existing scholarship (22). Further, the structural and conceptual contours of the field are illuminated through bibliometric mapping using VOS viewer. Finally, eligible full-text studies are subjected to thematic synthesis to assess how student-level experiences shape mobility patterns within global academic circuits.

In doing so, the study repositions India not merely as a source or destination of international student mobility, but as a complex actor within unequal knowledge systems. It is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1 - How has scholarship on international student migration involving India evolved in terms of publication trends, geographic distribution and thematic knowledge structures?

RQ2 - What factors influence patterns of inbound and outbound international student migration to and from India?

The conceptual framework of this study has been developed through the integration of theory of social reproduction with human capital theory to examine the drivers of international student mobility involving India (23, 24). The decision to pursue education abroad is shaped by habitus, through which individuals interpret and respond to opportunities within global higher education, bringing various forms of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – to bear on distinct educational pathways. Central to this phenomenon is the concept of 'illusio', understood as a socially constituted belief that the stakes of the educational game are worth pursuing and the acquisition of credentials from international institutions is essential for the maintenance of social position in the context of academic migration (23).

This perspective is complemented by human capital theory, through which international student mobility is linked to the wider transformation of higher education. Education is increasingly organized around skills, competitiveness and economic utility rather than treated only as a public or cultural good, such that mobility for study can be interpreted as a cross-border investment strategy for enhancing the labor market value of qualifications. Within this logic, international student mobility can therefore be understood as a multi-layered human-capital project involving competencies, credentials whose value depends on recognizability across borders and entry into institutional regimes that channel students as future skilled workers (24).

Methodology

This study combined three interlinked components: systematic retrieval and screening of literature based on PRISMA 2020 principles, quantitative bibliometric mapping and qualitative

full-text thematic synthesis. The systematic component structured the identification and selection of relevant studies, the bibliometric component provided a quantitative overview of the field, and the thematic component enabled in-depth, qualitative interpretation of the final corpus.

Data Extraction

Data retrieval was conducted exclusively within the Elsevier-affiliated database Scopus, which is also one of the largest archives of academic publications. Scopus was considered more suitable for systematic review research due to its transparent indexing criteria, advanced Boolean search functionality and reproducible filtering options, which offered methodological advantages over other databases like Web of Science and Google Scholar (25).

The search strategy was organized around two thematic axes. Firstly, international students' migration to India and secondly, Indian students aspiring to study in destinations abroad. Each keyword was separated from the other using the Boolean operator- AND. The education-related terms included "education," "higher education,"

and "global education." These were combined with mobility-related terms such as "student migration," "student mobility," and "international students." To ensure geographical specificity, the indicators "India" and "Indian" were incorporated. Directionality was captured through the inclusion of terms such as "inbound students," "outbound students," and "study abroad." These clusters were combined into a comprehensive Boolean search string as follows: ("education" OR "higher education" OR "global education") AND ("student migration" OR "student mobility" OR "international students") AND ("India" OR "Indian") AND ("inbound students" OR "outbound students" OR "study abroad").

Next, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined prior to screening. Table 1 summarizes the inclusion/exclusion criteria in detail as determined by the authors. It shows that the documents included were published in the form of journal articles, conference proceedings, books or book chapters, editorials and notes. These are published between 1995 and 2025. Further, the publications were included if they were in English and had an explicit research focus in terms of topic and geography.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Include	Exclude
Publication Types	Journal articles, conference proceedings, books, book chapters, editorials, notes	Theses, non-academic publications
Time Period	1995-2025	Publications outside this time frame
Accessibility	Open-access publications available in full-text	Full-texts unavailable
Language	English language publications	Non-English publications
Explicit Research Focus – Topic	Studies addressing international student migration, student mobility, internationalization of higher education	Studies focusing on tobacco consumption, mental health assessment tools, unrelated social justice issues
Explicit Research Focus – Geography	Studies focusing on India, Indian student or international students in India	Studies not contextualizing India

Data Screening

The screening and selection process for this review followed the framework of PRISMA 2020, as depicted in Figure 1. Figure 1 illustrates that the initial search provided 103 documents. Following this, the de-duplication process was carried out and 17 documents were removed, bringing the number of documents down to 86. These 86 records constituted the database for bibliometric analysis. Following this, accessibility screening resulted in exclusion of 18 documents, due to restricted full-text access. Only 68 documents were considered for further review. Thereafter, an

abstract review of the sixty-eight documents was conducted. At this stage, 9 articles were excluded as they did not focus on inbound and outbound student migration, or what these dynamics revealed about the internationalization of higher education in India. Publications were filtered on the grounds that they did not contextualize India or international students, exclusively mentioned school students, focused on tobacco consumption, utilization of mental health assessment tools, addressed global warming and discussed social justice in rural India. After this process of filtering, the remaining 59 publications were included for full-text review.

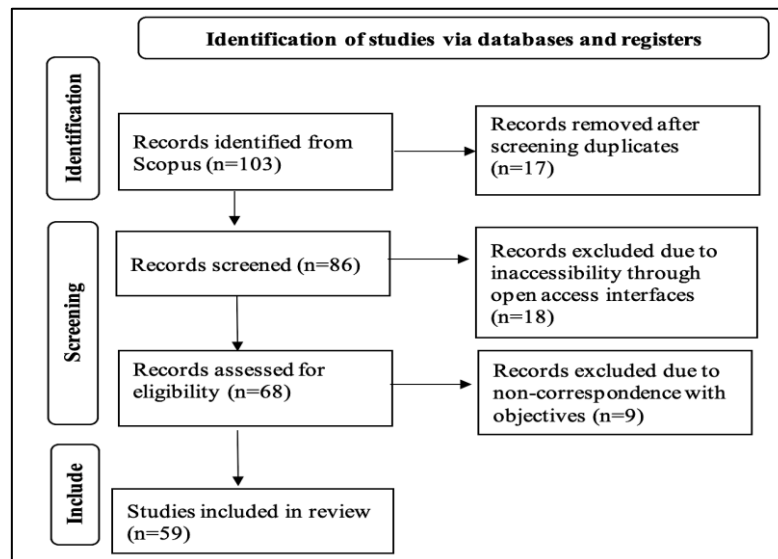


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Showing the Screening and Selection Process

Data Synthesis

Because the study combined bibliometric mapping with thematic synthesis, it is crucial to distinguish the analytical corpora clearly before synthesis. Bibliometric mapping was conducted on 86 articles, which arrived after the de-duplication process, whereas thematic synthesis was carried out on a subset of 59 articles, identified after multiple screening phases conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 model. Bibliometric analysis was performed using data extracted from the Scopus database and visualized through the tool VOS viewer, through which patterns such as co-word relationships were mapped (26). Subsequently, reflexive thematic analysis was employed due to its methodological transparency and suitability for synthesizing heterogeneous qualitative evidence while retaining interpretive depth (27, 28). The analysis was theoretically informed by the concepts of

capital, habitus and 'illusio', which served as sensitizing categories to guide code generation on affordability, cultural orientation and curriculum construction (23). In addition, the theory of human capital was used to situate student migration within processes of transnational institutional stratification (24). The methodological sequence is summarized in a flowchart showing the stepwise overview of how the study moved from initial retrieval to interpretive analysis, as depicted in Figure 2. Scopus database was used to identify literature published between 1995 and 2025, applying a structured Boolean search string that yielded 103 records. After removing duplicates, 86 unique studies were subjected to bibliometric analysis. Of these, 68 studies with accessible full texts were further screened based on titles and abstracts, leading to the exclusion of 9 studies. Finally, 59 studies were selected for an in-depth systematic full-text review.

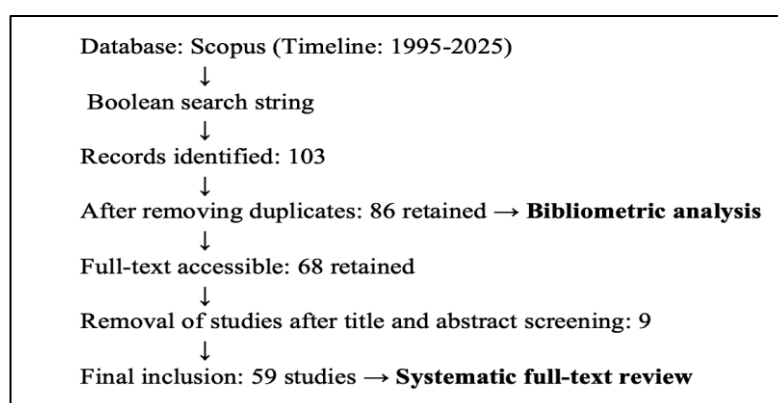


Figure 2: Flow Chart of Methodological Sequence

Results

The findings of the bibliometric analysis are presented in the results section. It addresses the first research question by treating international student migration involving India as a broad analytical corpus. Specifically, it examines the temporal growth of scholarship, the geographic distribution of research output and the conceptual organization of the field through co-word analysis. Table 2 summarizes the frequency of different document types retrieved from Scopus and

generated by authors. The dataset of 86 documents indicates that journal articles constitute the most prevalent document type, accounting for 63 of the total documents. Conference papers follow with a frequency of 10, book chapters and reviews are less frequent, with 7 and 4 publications each, while editorials and notes appear with a frequency of 1. It is suggested by the table that scholarship on international student migration involving India developed through peer-reviewed journal publishing rather than through more dispersed publication formats (29).

Table 2: Types of Documents Retrieved from Scopus

Document Type	Frequency
Article	63
Conference Paper	10
Book Chapter	7
Review	4
Editorial	1
Note	1

Temporal Distribution of Publications

The distribution of publications on international student migration involving India across three successive intervals is shown. Figure 3 depicts publication year against annual publication frequency, with each plotted point representing the number of publications recorded each year. In the first of the three periods, spanning from 1995 to before 2005, research output on international

student migration involving India remained relatively modest, reflecting the early stage of scholarly engagement with this topic. From 2005 to before 2015, the number of publications grew to 21, marking the beginning of a more sustained research trajectory. This upward trend intensified between 2015 and 2025, when the volume of publications surged to 63, reflecting intensified scholarly attention and growing academic investment in this area.

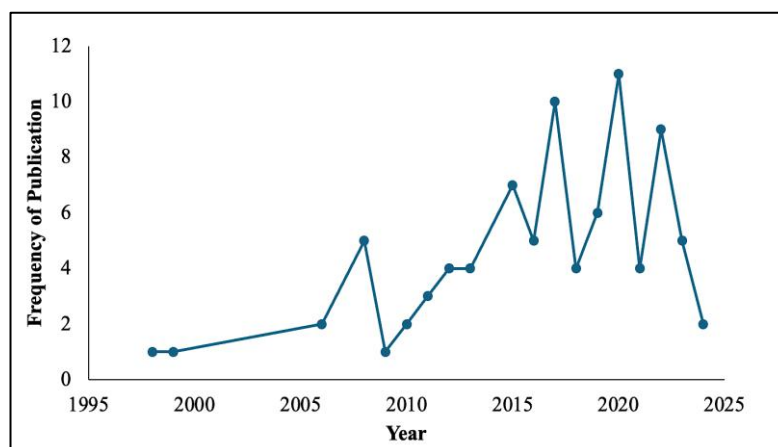


Figure 3: Frequency of Publication

An annual breakdown of publications reveals a dynamic and evolving research landscape. The earliest years, such as 1998, 1999 and 2009, registered only 1 publication each, likely attributable to nascent academic interest and limited funding opportunities. A steady increase began in 2006, followed by moderate growth

through 2011. The period between 2012 and 2020 represents a significant phase of expansion, with notable peaks in 2015 and 2017, and a maximum of eleven documents in 2020. This peak temporally coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which scholarly research into migration patterns, digital learning and policy responses affecting

international students intensified (30). Post-2020, a downward trend emerges, with output declining in subsequent years, possibly reflecting thematic saturation, shifting academic priorities and reduced targeted funding (31).

Spatial Distribution of Publications

The spatial distribution of research on international student migration to and from India spans six continents, as shown in Figure 4. Figure 4 depicts continents against their share of total research output, with each bar representing the percentage contribution of publications attributed

to the institutional affiliation of corresponding authors. North America has the highest research concentration, accounting for nearly half of the total research output, followed by Europe with approximately twenty-five per cent. Asia and Africa contribute around fifteen per cent and five per cent, respectively, while South America and Australia account for less than five per cent each. The concentration of research output in North America and Europe reflects destination-driven knowledge production, wherein host-country institutional perspectives are more prominently represented than sending-country analyses.

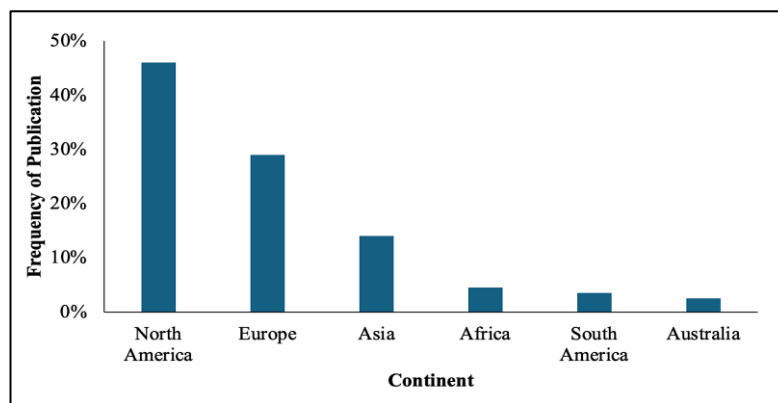


Figure 4: Spatial Distribution of Research on International Student Migration Involving India

Co-word Analysis of Publications

The VOS viewer map illustrates the interconnectedness of concepts related to international student migration involving India, as shown in Figure 5. Figure 5 shows that the most frequently occurring keyword was “India,” with 135 occurrences, reflecting both the geographic focus of the search strategy and the centrality of Indian students within global mobility discourse. Cluster formation was based on co-word occurrence thresholds generated through VOS viewer’s association strength normalization. Figure 5 further shows that central themes include

international student migration, higher education, experiences of Indian students abroad and experiences of foreign students in Indian academic institutions. The analysis reveals that acculturation and cultural adaptation emerge as critical processes, alongside peer support and collaborative networks as key enabling factors. Technical and medical education systems, particularly competency-based learning models, also appear as significant determinants of academic adaptation and professional formation. These bibliometric concentrations informed the thematic coding priorities in the subsequent qualitative synthesis stage.

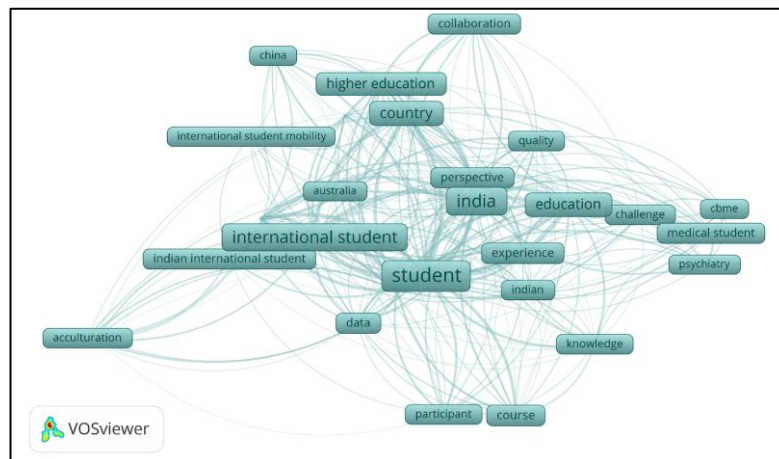


Figure 5: Co-word Analysis of the Bibliometric Dataset

Discussion

A full-text review was conducted for fifty-nine documents. The themes were organized along two analytical dimensions: international students migrating to India and Indian students migrating abroad. Across these dimensions, the review also identified context-specific determinants which were sub-classified according to the relative strength of empirical support. Stronger evidence refers to determinants discussed more consistently across a larger number of studies; moderate evidence refers to determinants supported across a smaller but recurring body of work and emerging evidence refers to determinants identified in a limited number of studies or more field-specific contexts.

International Student Migration to India

India has increasingly been positioned in recent policy discussions as an emerging destination within international student mobility, particularly in technical, medical and management education (32). This shift has been interpreted as a strategic response to historically entrenched patterns of outbound student migration and associated concerns regarding brain drain (33). In theory, current state efforts may thus be understood as a strategic attempt to reposition India within the global education market, not by displacing Western centers of higher learning, but by consolidating domain-specific institutional strengths to attract cost-sensitive and regionally proximate student populations (24).

Regionally, inbound flows have been dominated by South Asian countries (34). Nepal and Afghanistan emerge as significant source countries, followed by

Sudan, Bhutan and Nigeria. In contrast, East Asian representation has shrunk over time, while other traditional source countries such as Kenya and Sri Lanka have also registered proportional decreases. A slight increase has been observed in representation from Sub-Saharan Africa, while students from Arab states have remained steady (35). These flows are further being scaled through policy initiatives such as National Education Policy (NEP) and the Study in India program, by which select Indian universities are promoted as international destinations (36).

The literature in this review identifies several factors shaping international student mobility to India, which can be organized according to relative strength of empirical support. Affordability is most consistently documented as a determining factor, with inbound student flows to India originating predominantly from African and South Asian countries due to lower tuition fees and living costs (37). Migration decisions are also shaped by a second set of determinants related to intercultural and institutional considerations, including safety and course availability, alongside access to multicultural and multilingual environments (38). Finally, a smaller body of research points to the growing relevance of curriculum internationalization and global competence, representing emerging determinants of international student mobility to India. However, the potential of these initiatives to strengthen India's attractiveness as a destination is hindered by limited post-study employment pathways and infrastructural constraints. These determinants

are explored in greater detail in the following sections.

Affordability and Cost Considerations of Inbound Students

Eleven studies identify affordability as a central determinant of India's appeal as an international education destination. The primary reasons for choosing India have been identified in research as lower fees and modest living costs, which significantly reduce financial barriers to entry and render India into a practical alternative for students from cost-sensitive regions (39). The primary decision-making criteria have also been identified as the perceived utility of Indian degrees, alongside institution size, location and the availability of financial aid (40). However, despite strong academic specialization, Indian universities have been criticized for their narrow focus on subject-specific knowledge, with the development of essential soft-skills such as adaptability, intercultural understanding and communication often being neglected (41). Supporting this claim, a direct and positive correlation has been reported between behavioral cultural intelligence and psychological adaptation, aligning with prior studies underlining the importance of behavioral skills such as flexibility and effective interpersonal interaction for thriving in a foreign environment (42). From the perspective of social reproduction theory, profound implications for symbolic capital development have been produced by the current lack of global exposure and intercultural training (23). The limited development of embodied global competencies creates a prestige ceiling where Indian credentials are required for their low cost and technical utility but lack the distinction to command authority in elite transnational labor markets.

Intercultural Adaptation and Student Experiences of Inbound Students

Eleven studies examine intercultural and institutional adaptation among inbound students, identifying language barriers, bureaucratic opacity and infrastructural limitations as persistent challenges. A significant language barrier has been observed, wherein students from non-English-speaking countries struggle to understand lectures due to speed, accent and variations in Indian English (43). Additionally, the adjustment process is further complicated by differences in

institutional norms, including stricter attendance regulations relative to students' prior educational contexts (44). Infrastructural concerns about internet access, hostel facilities and restroom maintenance are also noted, while variations in pedagogic culture are identified as salient (45). Challenges have also been reported by international students accustomed to a more informal and interactive learning environment, particularly in relation to finding Indian professors more distant and experiencing challenges in obtaining acceptance letters and passing English tests (46). It has been posited in foundational social reproduction theory that the development of social capital requires a deliberate investment in networks of mutual recognition (23). Where language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles and limited interactional familiarity persist, opportunities to form lasting professional and peer networks remain stifled, shaping the depth of students' integrative experiences in host institutions.

Adaptation challenges extend to everyday practices as well. Patterns of dietary acculturation among international students from Iran, Africa and South Korea have also been observed, encompassing a range of issues including increased consumption of processed foods and changes in nutritional intake (47). These findings indicate the everyday material adjustments accompanying transnational mobility, highlighting the role of campus support systems in shaping student well-being. Additional institutional barriers are reported across studies, including cumbersome visa requirements and unclear application procedures (48). Notwithstanding these constraints, inbound international students often report continued satisfaction with specialized academic infrastructure, particularly technical facilities and laboratories. This pattern suggests that even when broader student integration remains partial, classrooms remain legitimate sites for institutionalized capital accumulation (23).

Curriculum Internationalization and Global Competence for Inbound Students

Evidence from ten studies across higher education fields highlights the growing emphasis on embedding global competencies within Indian

university curricula. Much of this literature concentrates on healthcare education, where internationalization pressures are most visible. Studies on medical, dental, nursing and public health education have consistently identified the need to integrate global perspectives in curriculum to standardize competencies that can be supported across institutions (49). These curricular recalibrations reflect broader transitions within the transnational labor market where professional mobility depends on the comparability of training standards. It has been argued within human capital theory that these developments resonate with broader shifts in educational investment, reflecting a requirement for curricula itself to become global in orientation, with transnational standards and professional expectations (24).

Sector-specific evidence reinforces these patterns. Limited engagement with global oral health frameworks has been identified in research on dental education, revealing the need for greater emphasis on ethics and cultural competence to enhance preparedness for international roles (50). Similarly, the benefits of integrating language proficiency and cultural sensitivity in nursing education have been emphasized, as these better equip incoming students to work effectively across diverse patient populations (51). Pedagogical approaches fostering international experience also strengthen professional readiness among future public health professionals. For instance, greater adaptability, cultural competence and professional confidence have been shown to develop among students participating in internationally oriented curricula within a mixed-methods study (52). A complementary strand of literature extends curriculum internationalization beyond technical training to consciously integrate students' psychosocial well-being. Written emotional expression exercises have, for instance, been shown to lower perceived stress levels among international students (53). Effectiveness during the pandemic was similarly demonstrated by the Building Infrastructure Leading to Diversity program, which combined online professional engagement with synchronous in-person elements (54). Through the lens of human capital theory, such an alignment reflects processes of curricular standardization wherein national training programs integrate their outputs within transnational professional benchmarks. In this

sense, the drive towards International Service Learning (ISL) and improved cultural sensitivity can be understood as mechanisms through which Indian higher education incrementally strengthens its positioning within the global education landscape (24).

Comparative analyses further suggest a differentiated picture. A slowdown in applications to US graduate programs has been observed by scholars, which coincide with strengthened educational capacity in emerging regions like India (55). Although these shifts do not signal a complete reversal of global academic hierarchies, they highlight the growing salience of alternative destinations like India. The strengthening of accreditation systems like National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Board of Accreditation (NBA), as well as addressing specific pedagogic gaps by expanding research opportunities, particularly short-term collaborations in priority sectors such as Digital India and Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) has been emphasized by existing studies (56). In this capacity, India operates as a Global South metropole, attracting students through affordable English-medium professional training and credentials that circulate within intensifying South-South mobility circuits despite an enduringly unequal knowledge order.

Interestingly, the reviewed literature suggests that similar analytical domains also emerge in relation to outbound student mobility, though they operate differently, depending on whether India is positioned as a destination or a source within global higher education.

International Student Migration from India

The migration of Indian students to foreign countries for higher education is commonly situated within literature on broader historical and geopolitical processes such as global capitalism and racialized citizenship regimes. Greater entry for highly educated Indian professionals, including engineers, doctors and information technology workers, was enabled through skill-based pathways by the post-1965 reconfiguration of immigration laws in countries like the United States and Canada (57). India is identified by recent estimates as the second largest source country of international students worldwide, with a total of 1.3 million students abroad, followed by

China (58). Across the studies reviewed, international enrolments from India have been shown to have a strong concentration within a small number of Anglophone destinations: the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia (59, 60).

The reviewed literature identifies several determinants shaping this pattern of international student migration from India. For analytical clarity, these determinants are organized according to the strength of available empirical evidence. The strongest empirical support was provided to cost considerations, where anticipated financial returns linked to post-study work opportunities significantly impact Indian students' destination choices. A second group of studies provides moderate evidence on determinants related to intercultural adaptation, including experiences of discrimination and the role of co-national networks in facilitating adjustment abroad. Finally, limited but emerging evidence on curriculum internationalization, have been identified in a smaller body of research, highlighting how differences in curriculum design and professional accreditation influence both destination choice and learning outcomes for Indian students abroad (61). A form of 'illusio' may be seen in this sustained investment in outbound educational migration through which Western degrees and institutional affiliations are repeatedly identified as symbolic assets by Indian families, thereby sustaining continued participation in these pathways after significant economic resources have been committed (23).

Affordability and Cost Considerations for Outbound Students

Across the literature, twelve studies identify Indian students as a strategically significant recruitment population for international higher education institutions. These studies interestingly locate the rationale behind outbound student flow within India's national higher education context. Access to social mobility has been limited by institutional capacity and infrastructure constraints, thus making high-quality higher education increasingly competitive (62). Within this context, international education has been argued to be frequently framed as a status-enhancing tool through which Indian students mobilize their inter-cultural competencies and

enhance prospects for upward mobility, while managing the cost-related trade-offs (63).

Destination-specific dynamics highlight that for outbound Indian students; affordability factors operate in conjunction with migration-linked returns rather than as standalone considerations. Countries such as Australia are perceived not merely as academic destinations but as sites offering extended mobility opportunities, where a higher financial investment is often offset by post-study work options and flexible immigration pathways (64). Importantly, it is indicated by research that permanent residency has often been pursued by Indian students less with the intent to settle and more to gain transnationally mobile status, advantageously positioning themselves within global opportunity structures, rather than committing to long-term national incorporation (65).

At the same time, the reviewed literature also emphasizes that Indian student outmigration is internally differentiated by cost, giving rise to low-cost pragmatic alternatives, alongside prestige-oriented ones. Ukraine has been highlighted in research on migration for medical education as a lucrative destination, owing to comparatively low-cost medical degrees, English-language education and internationally recognized credentials (66). However, the conflict situation in Ukraine exposes significant vulnerabilities within these seemingly pragmatic pathways. Regulatory and ethical challenges are brought into focus by the sudden displacement of Indian medical students, forcing them to seek alternatives such as transfers to other foreign institutions or reintegration into Indian medical schools (67).

Synthesizing these findings, the literature suggests that outbound Indian student migration is shaped centrally by financial calculation, with students and families weighing high costs, debt burdens and uncertain returns against perceived symbolic and occupational gains. Across prestige-driven and pragmatic routes, outbound Indian student migration emerges not merely as an academic decision but as a consequential strategy for securing future upward mobility despite economic risk. To reiterate, this pattern can also be interpreted through the concept of 'illusio', whereby continued investment in international mobility pathways is sustained by an internalized

belief that domestic educational credentials lack sufficient global exchange value (23).

Intercultural Adaptation and Student Experiences of Outbound Students

Ten studies demonstrate that outbound Indian students' adjustment to host country's social environments is shaped by experiences of isolation and unfamiliar expectations. Across these studies, the adjustment process has been indicated to be complicated by racial and cultural dynamics, particularly for Indians as students of color, who are often faced with discrimination in social and academic settings (68). Nevertheless, emotional resilience and everyday adaptation are more commonly facilitated through friendships with Indian peers and regional Indian associations, further supporting students' personal well-being and adaptation to local norms (69).

Using empirical tools such as the Color-Blind Racial Attitude Scale and the Sense of Belonging Scale, outbound Indian students' mental health and social integration have been shown to be affected by discrimination and limited prior engagement with racial discourse in home countries (70). The persistence of gendered power relations within family structures has been shown to impact students, where male students in the United States reported limited independence and negative adaptation experiences abroad (71). Similarly, female Indian students relied on Ayurveda and other traditional practices to manage stress in the context of Western medical systems followed at their university. Holistic and spiritual practices have been argued to help Indian students cope with academic and social pressures in a culturally familiar way (72).

In the context of Indian students in the United States, self-confidence, a positive outlook, social connections and language proficiency have been reported as critical for adjustment (73). Complementarily, ongoing shifts in the international higher education landscape have also led American institutions to recognize the need to adapt to attract students who might otherwise have desirable domestic opportunities (74, 75). Based on these findings, the literature suggests that outbound Indian students' adaptation is contingent on their ability to navigate multiple forms of socio-cultural connections simultaneously. Drawing upon social reproduction theory, co-national networks can be understood as

bonding social capital, while the absence or limited development of bridging social capital emerges as a central barrier to longer-term student integration (23).

Curriculum Internationalization and Global Competence among Outbound Students

Five studies identify that curriculum design influences career paths and even migration decisions among Indian students, particularly in fields where local opportunities are limited. Greater access to specialized training has been highlighted in research comparing Indian and Zimbabwean medical education, prompting many students to circumvent competitive pathways in India and seek specialization abroad (76). It is observed in the reviewed literature that Indian students studying in Anglophone countries encounter distinct academic expectations, such as conducting independent research, engaging in scholarly critique and mastering argumentative writing (77). It has been illustrated by another study that language proficiency becomes essential for academic success in such environments (78). Uneven adaptation is observed among students, as greater familiarity with Anglophone academic norms is often easily achieved by those educated in international or elite English-medium schools, whereas tailored institutional support may be required by those from regionally rooted Indian educational systems (79).

Further, Indian students studying medicine in China have been found to face a mismatch between curriculum quality and affordability (80). While economic capital is conserved by choosing Chinese medical schools, deficits in clinical rigor and professional accreditation restrict reintegration into elite medical fields. This pattern is reflective of global knowledge hierarchies, wherein Western-centric curricula are positioned at the apex of the global education market, while the academic practices, pedagogic styles and prior knowledge of students from the Global South come to be viewed as deficiencies that require correction (24). Across the reviewed studies, the absence of structured curricula addressing these academic skill gaps is therefore identified as a key factor in producing unequal outcomes among Indian students abroad.

Conclusion

This review, in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines and bibliometric analysis protocols, synthesized relevant literature to evaluate the evolving nature of scholarship on India's position within global student mobility systems. Addressing RQ1, it is found that scholarship on student migration involving India has expanded steadily over the past decade. Geographically, knowledge production has remained uneven, dominated by Western institutional authorship and empirical focus on Anglophone destinations. Thematically, scholarship clusters around the structural dynamics of international student migration and the lived experiences of students, although inbound and outbound flows are rarely examined in a shared analytical frame. With respect to RQ2, it is demonstrated in the review that India's role in international student mobility is structurally multidimensional, challenging the dominant binary that frames India primarily as a sending country, rather than also recognizing its role as a receiving destination. Inbound mobility is concentrated among students from South Asia and Africa, driven by affordability, English-medium instruction and constrained access at home, whereas outbound student mobility remains oriented towards popular Anglophone destinations associated with prestige, post-study work and immigration pathways. However, scholarship addressing these trends remains siloed, underscoring the need for research that analyzes student migration involving India relationally rather than as separate directional flows.

Based on these theoretical findings, two key targeted and institutionally grounded policy suggestions are advanced in this study. For inbound mobility, the urgent policy priority is to move from aspirational internationalization to regulated regional efforts. It has been noted in the study that India's strongest inbound prospects lie in South Asia and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, therefore there is a need for regulated regional strategy which prioritizes corridor-building with neighboring and partner regions through scholarships, credit-recognition systems, dual degrees and sector-specific recruitment in areas such as health, education and digital innovation, while avoiding the infrastructural strain that unmanaged expansion could create. In practical

terms, this would require the scaling up of what is already underway through the Study in India program, such as easier visa processes for foreign student applicants and implementing the University Grants Commissions' provision for 25% additional supernumerary seats for international students in Indian universities. This uptake in student enrolment should also be meaningfully followed with housing availability, student support and labor-market pathways.

For outbound migration, policy focus must address the needs of students who pursue education abroad in full-degree formats, particularly in relation to improving affordability through scholarships, access to reliable information, sustained visa guidance, academic preparedness, cultural and psychological support as well as protection from fraudulent intermediaries in host countries. However, full-degree migration should not be the only focus and there is need to build a hybrid model that distributes international exposure across domestic, regional and overseas sites. Steps should be undertaken to design programs wherein Indian students complete a substantial portion of their study in India, gain short-cycle international exposure through research, internship, laboratory training, or clinical placements abroad and accumulate credentials across partner institutions. Such measures are already underway through extended campuses abroad such as Indian Institute of Technology Madras's Zanzibar campus, while programs such as Scheme for the Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration and Global Initiative of Academic Networks have created structured channels for faculty and scholar engagement. Through these initiatives, the cost-burdens and geo-political risks of long-duration study abroad could be reduced, while preserving the symbolic, academic and professional gains that drive outbound mobility.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to certain methodological limitations. First, the exclusive reliance on the Scopus database may have excluded relevant publications indexed in other databases such as Web of Science, JSTOR and Google Scholar, thereby limiting the comprehensiveness of the review. Second, the restriction to English language sources

may have marginalized scholarship published in regional or non-English languages. In the Indian context, specifically, it may have resulted in the underrepresentation of locally grounded perspectives on higher education and migration. Third, the bibliometric analysis reflects patterns within indexed academic output rather than the full range of knowledge production. While useful for identifying publication trends and knowledge clusters, it does not capture grey literature, policy reports or unpublished dissertations, as well as other non-indexed forms of knowledge. Fourth, the exclusion of inaccessible full texts may have introduced selection bias, as the final sample may over-represent open access publications, while omitting relevant studies published in restricted journals. Finally, the thematic synthesis is interpretive in nature. Although conducted systematically and guided by a clear theoretical framework, reflexive thematic analysis necessarily involves research judgement in coding and interpretation. Accordingly, the findings should be read as theory informed synthesis and not exhaustive representation of all scholarship on international student migration involving India.

A key direction of future research has been indicated by this study: the need to move beyond West-centric evaluative frames that overlook India's role within emerging multi-nodal educational geographies. The proliferation of high-cost revenue-driven programs in Western universities has raised doubts about their academic value, while intensified immigration restrictions in the traditional Big Four destinations such as United States, Canada, Australia and United Kingdom have generated heightened perceptions of risk and precarity among students. Against this backdrop, a recalibration of institutional competition is indicated by the rise of alternative hubs like India and other destinations across the Gulf Cooperation Council and Southeast Asia, without entirely displacing Western dominance. Addressing these gaps, future research should adopt relational and multi-nodal frameworks, combining longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses to better capture India's role within a differentiated global student mobility system.

Abbreviations

ISL: International Service Learning, ISRO: Indian Space Research Organization, NAAC: National

Assessment and Accreditation Council, NBA: National Board of Accreditation, NEP: National Education Policy, OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic and Meta Analysis, VOSviewer: Visualization of Similarities Viewer.

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Author Contributions

Anushka Sinha: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing, data visualization, original draft preparation, Anwasha Sarkar: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing, data visualization, original draft preparation, Aditya Raj: methodology, validation, supervision, review and editing, critical revision.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Data Availability

No primary data was generated or analyzed in the study. All sources referenced are publicly available.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

No artificial intelligence tools or automated writing technologies were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Ethics Approval

Ethics Approval was not required for this study as it is based on an analysis of existing literature.

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