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Dilemmas of Social Justice in the Practice of Internationalization at an Irish University

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ABSTRACT: *Policies advancing social inclusion in Irish higher education face new challenges with increased recruitment of students from the Global South. This study explores how staff at a University of Sanctuary in Ireland navigate tensions between internationalization and social justice. Using reflective thematic analysis of interviews with 11 staff and senior managers, two main themes emerged: (1) paradoxes of internationalization (as a tool for diversity, humanitarianism, or commodification) and (2) dilemmas of social justice and sustainability. Participants highlighted border-bound definitions of inclusion and critiqued extractive models of internationalization that reinforce colonial and unsustainable practices and prevent them from supporting and enhancing students' experience of inclusion. We argue, in line with critical internationalization studies, that new models of internationalization are needed to promote sustainable education, equity, and social justice in higher education.*

Keywords: critical internationalization studies, equity, higher education, inclusive internationalization, SDGs, social inclusion, social justice

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INTRODUCTION

Internationalization has become a central pillar of higher education policy and practice. Across the globe, universities have embraced internationalization as a strategy to enhance institutional prestige, attract mobile talent, and secure alternative funding streams in an increasingly competitive knowledge economy (De Wit et al., 2015; Knight, 2004). Once focused on academic cooperation and intercultural understanding, the internationalization agenda has gradually shifted toward a market-oriented paradigm, where student mobility, transnational partnerships, and English-medium instruction are frequently framed as instruments of global positioning (Marginson, 2006). This shift reflects another trend toward the neo-liberalization of higher education, with internationalization serving as a revenue-generating mechanism rather than advancing global sustainable goals (Sheridan & Tanaka, 2026).

However, as the internationalization agenda grows, so too do concerns about its ethical and social implications for student experience. Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the contradictions between the economic logics underpinning internationalization and the values of equity, justice, and inclusion that universities support and promote (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). While institutions celebrate cultural diversity, they simultaneously operate with differential tuition fees and limited support structures that disproportionately affect students from marginalized backgrounds (Gautam et al., 2016). As a result, internationalization may reinforce rather than challenge global inequalities, raising critical questions about whom international education truly serves and at what cost.

We investigate how internationalization and inclusion practices are negotiated in a Global North university. In this context, university internationalization is characterized by entangled and contradictory strands, similar to Khoo's (2011) comparative study of Irish and Canadian universities. She identified tensions between market-driven rationales, focused on recruitment, reputation, and profitability, and more ethically driven approaches prioritizing global citizenship, social justice, and development. Our study further interrogates the intersection of internationalization and social inclusion, on the one hand, and sustainability, on the other (Tikly, 2019). Sustainability in this context extends beyond environmental considerations to encompass ethical engagement, responsible knowledge exchange, and equitable educational practices (Salmi, 2025; Unterhalter, 2019). This triad of priorities, internationalization, inclusion, and sustainability, often exists in tension. Universities may struggle to simultaneously pursue international prestige, broaden access for underrepresented

groups, and uphold socially responsible practices without compromising one or more of these goals. The question is how university staff experience and negotiate these tensions, directly and indirectly affecting their role in supporting students.

These global dynamics are reflected in the Irish national higher education landscape. The government has promoted internationalization through successive strategies (Government of Ireland, 2024b), positioning Ireland as a hub attracting international talent. At the same time, universities are required to meet national targets for equity of access (Higher Education Authority, 2022), support refugees and asylum seekers through University of Sanctuary initiatives, and embed sustainability (Government of Ireland, 2024a) into institutional strategies. These layered and sometimes conflicting mandates pose challenges for higher education professionals tasked with implementing them.

Our study fills a gap in empirical research on how university staff members with responsibilities across internationalization and inclusion interpret and navigate these competing demands. While policy analyses and student-centered studies are abundant (Hong et al., 2025; Mittelmeier et al., 2022), fewer studies examine the perspectives of staff working at the interface between these agendas (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017). We focus our research on their insights to understand how institutional logics are enacted and how individual staff are (or are not) supporting the social inclusion of international students.

Research Question

We aim to address this evidence gap by examining how staff and senior leaders in a medium-sized Irish university negotiate the overlap between internationalization and inclusion practices in a sustainable and ethical way. We ask: How do institutional actors think about and practice internationalization and social inclusion simultaneously in a young public university in the Global North? Through qualitative interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, we explore the challenges faced by those who shape and deliver international and inclusion strategies within their institutional contexts. In doing so, this study contributes to a nuanced and practice-informed understanding of what it means to pursue socially just and sustainable internationalization in higher education today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past two decades, internationalization has become central to higher education. Initially defined through mobility, collaborative research, and global partnerships, it now also encompasses economic competitiveness and institutional reputation (Altbach, 2002; Lomer et al., 2018). This expansion raises questions about its alignment with social justice and sustainability. In Europe, internationalization is often framed as a path to global citizenship, academic excellence, and intercultural understanding (De Wit, 2019; Knight, 2012). However, critics highlight the dominance of market rationales that treat students as revenue sources and partnerships as strategic assets, sidelining opportunities for meaningful intercultural exchange and global solidarity (Altbach & Knight,

2007; Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; Stein, 2021). We investigate these tensions between values and market demands.

Despite the growing prominence of internationalization, research in this area remains fragmented and undertheorized. A scoping review by Mittelmeier et al. (2024) found that only 22.8% of studies explicitly address student outcomes, and the literature is scattered across hundreds of journals and disciplines. The authors call for evidence-based, inclusive internationalization embedded across institutions and focused on intercultural learning and reflection. Recent scholarship in the *Journal of International Students* similarly highlights the need to move beyond narrow or singular perspectives on international student experience, calling for greater attention to institutional, structural, and contextual factors that shape students' lived realities (Hong et al., 2025). We respond to these calls by examining staff perspectives on student social inclusion. Without insights from institutional actors, internationalization risks becoming a reputational exercise rather than a meaningful, ethical practice (Khoo, 2011; Pashby & de Andreotti, 2016; Wang, 2026).

Concurrently, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) have become key priorities in higher education policies, with universities developing strategies to support historically marginalized groups. In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority's Access Plan (2022) promotes participation from underrepresented groups, including low-income students, those with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. However, inclusion strategies are typically framed within national borders (Harden-Wolfson, 2024), and their intersection with internationalization remains understudied.

Some researchers argue that inclusion and internationalization are often treated as disconnected agendas, lacking institutional coordination or strategic alignment (Jones et al., 2021). This disconnect is exacerbated by oversimplified understandings of the "international student experience," which often ignore the group's diversity and reinforce a "false dichotomy" between domestic and international students (Jones, 2017). We advocate for integrated student support based on need rather than nationality. Our study gives empirical accounts of how staff and senior leaders negotiate these student supports, thus directly and indirectly affecting their inclusion.

Colonial legacies and epistemic hierarchies in global higher education further complicate the relationship between internationalization and inclusion. Scholars in decolonial and critical internationalization fields show how knowledge production and mobility patterns often reinforce asymmetries between the Global North and South (Stein, 2022; Tikly, 2019). While universities in the Global North actively recruit students and researchers from the Global South, these engagements frequently operate on extractive terms, benefiting the host institution more than the communities from which knowledge and labor are sourced. For instance, the threat of brain drain is reported as a main risk of internationalization in several countries (Gaebel & Zhang, 2024; Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024). In addition, international students are not supported in negotiating difficult and migration challenges (Wiesel-Brown, 2026). These issues raise ethical questions

about the justice and sustainability of global academic engagement, which we investigate at a young Global North university.

We align with scholarship that calls for rethinking internationalization through the lenses of social justice and ethical responsibility. We adopt the lens of "critical internationalization" as an approach that questions the structural conditions and power dynamics that shape global academic exchange (de Andreotti, 2014). Rather than assuming internationalization to be inherently beneficial, we investigate how and whether university staff question their complicity in global injustices and seek to foster reciprocal and responsible relationships (Pashby & de Andreotti, 2016).

Similarly, the concept of "sustainable internationalization" considers not only the financial and operational dimensions of international strategies but also their social and environmental implications (De Wit & Deca, 2020). In higher education, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities), are increasingly referenced. This includes questioning whether current mobility practices are environmentally viable, whether partnerships foster mutual capacity-building, and whether global engagements contribute to or detract from broader goals of justice. In Ireland, universities are embedding the SDGs into strategic plans, but these commitments often clash with carbon-intensive internationalization models that rely on air travel and high student turnover. Recent literature points to a growing sustainability paradox. While universities support ecological responsibility, their international activities may undermine these very commitments (Healey, 2023). When sustainability is primarily interpreted through a technical or managerial lens, focusing on efficiency and carbon metrics, it risks marginalizing the ethical and political dimensions of sustainable education, including equity, inclusion, and decolonization (Beck, 2021).

These complexities are heightened by pressures around accountability, performance metrics, and financial survival, especially in the postpandemic context (Mintz, 2021). Marketization has intensified the view of international students as consumers and as a source of revenue, leading to what some describe as the "commodification" of internationalization (Lomer et al., 2018). Universities then end up instrumentalizing diversity, where cultural difference is valued not for its epistemic or social contribution but for its branding and marketing utility (Ahmed, 2020). In Ireland, the government's reduced subsidies for third-level education increased the value of internationalization for its commercial input (Khoo, 2011).

Nevertheless, emerging alternatives challenge these dominant models. Frameworks such as the "ethics of care" (Sodhi & Martin, 2023), "pluriversity" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021), and "internationalization otherwise" (Stein et al., 2023) call for engagement grounded in humility, reciprocity, and respect. Programs such as the University of Sanctuary, adopted in both the UK and Ireland, show how institutions can adopt socially inclusive internationalization by supporting displaced populations and committing to human rights. We investigate whether Irish-based staff combine internationalization with goals of social justice and

sustainability through intentional, critical, and context-sensitive practices (Liu, 2023).

However, operationalizing such frameworks requires more than aspirational language. It involves rethinking institutional priorities, resource allocation, and governance. Universities must critically examine who benefits from internationalization, whose knowledge is legitimized, and what kinds of global futures they enable or exclude. To see how these dilemmas play out in practice, we document the lived experiences of university staff tasked with implementing internationalization strategies, particularly those in roles encompassing inclusion, equity, and global engagement.

Theoretical Framework

We use a critical theoretical framework, drawing on justice-oriented, decolonial, and political-economic perspectives to understand the tensions between internationalization and social inclusion in higher education. Below, we explain three interrelated theoretical strands used to guide our analysis: Nancy Fraser's (2007) concept of misframing, Stein's (2021) and de Andreotti's (2014) critical internationalization, and the critique of neoliberal governance in higher education (Mintz, 2021).

To analyze structural exclusions embedded in internationalization policies, we use Fraser's theory of justice (2007). Her concept of misframing refers to the unjust delimitation of the boundaries within which justice claims can be made. In a globalized context, misframing occurs when institutions define their communities in ways that exclude transnational others, such as asylum seekers, refugees, or students from the Global South, from full participation and recognition. This exclusion constitutes a form of "political death," whereby the affected individuals are denied standing to claim justice.

This imperative is echoed in decolonial and critical education scholarship, particularly the work of Stein (2021) and de Andreotti (2014), who critique the assumptions underpinning conventional models of internationalization. De Andreotti urges educators and institutions to move beyond "soft" forms of global citizenship that promote inclusion without addressing underlying global inequalities. Her notion of critical internationalization calls for a reflexive, historically informed engagement with the power relations that shape global knowledge exchanges. From this perspective, internationalization should not simply aim to increase mobility or visibility but should question whose knowledge is centered, whose interests are served, and what kinds of futures are being enabled. This lens is crucial for analyzing how the humanitarian ethos embedded in University of Sanctuary initiatives may still operate within neoliberal and colonial logics, even as it offers material support to marginalized students.

Building on these perspectives, we also engage with scholarship critiquing the neoliberal restructuring of higher education (Mintz, 2021). Neoliberalism has redefined education as a private investment rather than a public good, framing students as consumers and institutions as service providers. This market logic intensifies the commodification of internationalization, in which international

students are recruited not primarily as partners in knowledge cocreation but as sources of revenue and global prestige.

Together, these theoretical lenses enable a multidimensional analysis of how internationalization and social inclusion are conceptualized and enacted by institutional actors. Rather than treating inclusion as a matter of access or representation alone, we explore how inclusion is negotiated, who is granted the right to belong, and under what conditions. By integrating Fraser's understanding of boundary justice, Stein's and de Andreotti's critique of internationalization, and Mintz's critique of neoliberalism, we explore the paradoxes, ambivalences, and potential openings for more just and sustainable practices in a university of the Global North.

METHOD

Study Design

A qualitative design was adopted to explore university staff's perspectives on the intersections of internationalization, social inclusion, and sustainability. The aim was to gain rich, contextually grounded insights from individuals whose roles directly influence institutional policies and practices in these areas. The approach was interpretive and constructivist, recognizing the coconstruction of meaning between researchers and participants.

We followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) to ensure rigorous design, conduct, and transparent reporting of qualitative findings (Tong et al., 2007). However, the criterion for data saturation was not followed, as it is incompatible with reflective thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2021). Instead, we used the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), which posits that the more relevant information a sample holds for the actual study, the fewer participants are needed.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2014), targeting individuals with direct experience or strategic oversight of internationalization and inclusion efforts within a medium-sized Irish university, thereby capturing a range of institutional perspectives rather than aiming for numerical representativeness. Eleven participants were selected across a range of strategic and student-facing domains: internationalization, community engagement, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), access and widening participation, chaplaincy, the University of Sanctuary initiative, the Graduate School, and the student representative body. This diverse cross-section of roles provided a rich basis for exploring how internationalization is understood and enacted across different institutional functions. Table 1 outlines participant demographics; names and identifiers were pseudonymized for confidentiality. Participants were invited via email, and those who expressed interest were subsequently scheduled for interviews at their convenience.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants (N=11)

Participant ID	Gender	Role (broad category)
P1	F	Administrative Staff
P2	F	Senior Management Staff
P3	F	Senior Management Staff
P4	F	Administrative Staff
P5	M	Administrative Staff
P6	F	Senior Management Staff
P7	F	Administrative Staff
P8	M	Senior Management Staff
P9	M	Senior Management Staff
P10	F	Administrative Staff
P11	F	Senior Management Staff

Data Collection

Data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted virtually via MS Teams, a practical choice that supported accessibility and flexibility. Interviews were led by the first author (LS) and followed a topic guide developed from the literature and refined through pilot testing. Topics included perceptions of internationalization, institutional strategies, and challenges around inclusion. Interviews ranged from 40 to 85 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Recordings were deleted following transcription. A debriefing sheet was emailed to each participant after the interview, and the process remained consistent across all participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis (RTA), guided by Braun and Clarke’s framework (2006, 2020). This method emphasizes the interpretive role of the researcher in identifying and developing themes through deep engagement with the data. An inductive approach was used primarily because we were interested in a data-driven approach that identified themes based on what the participants brought and discussed. Nevertheless, deductive analysis

was used to organize the reporting of the data around the key theoretical interests identified in the previous sections.

The analytical process involved Braun and Clarke's six phases, from data familiarization to narrative reporting. In addition, the development of codes, subthemes, and higher-order concepts was organized using Naem's structured thematic analysis (Naem et al., 2023), which provided a systematic framework for moving from keywords and descriptive codes to interpretive concepts and an overarching conceptual model, enhancing analytic transparency and coherence (see Table 2). Attention was given to internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 2014) to ensure that the themes were distinct yet internally coherent. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process, including regular analytic journaling and peer debriefing to address assumptions and maintain critical distance.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences (EHS) Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the university. Participants were provided with a detailed information sheet, privacy notice, and consent form in advance of interviews. Consent was obtained electronically and reconfirmed verbally at the start of each session. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. All data were pseudonymized, with names, roles, and offices removed. Transcripts and related materials were stored securely in a password-protected OneDrive folder, accessible only to the primary researcher and research team. Data management fully complied with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines, ensuring the confidentiality and secure processing of personal information.

Positionality

The authors are researchers originating outside the Global North and currently working within a Global North public university. This positioning offers a dual perspective as institutional insiders engaged in internationalization practices and as critical observers of the global inequalities that shape higher education systems. Our analysis is informed by a commitment to higher education as a public good and by skepticism toward market-driven models of internationalization that condition access to third-level education on financial capacity.

FINDINGS

The data analysis resulted in two main themes, Paradoxes of Internationalization and Dilemmas of Social Justice, which are presented below and illustrated with relevant verbatim quotations (see Figure 1 and Table 2).

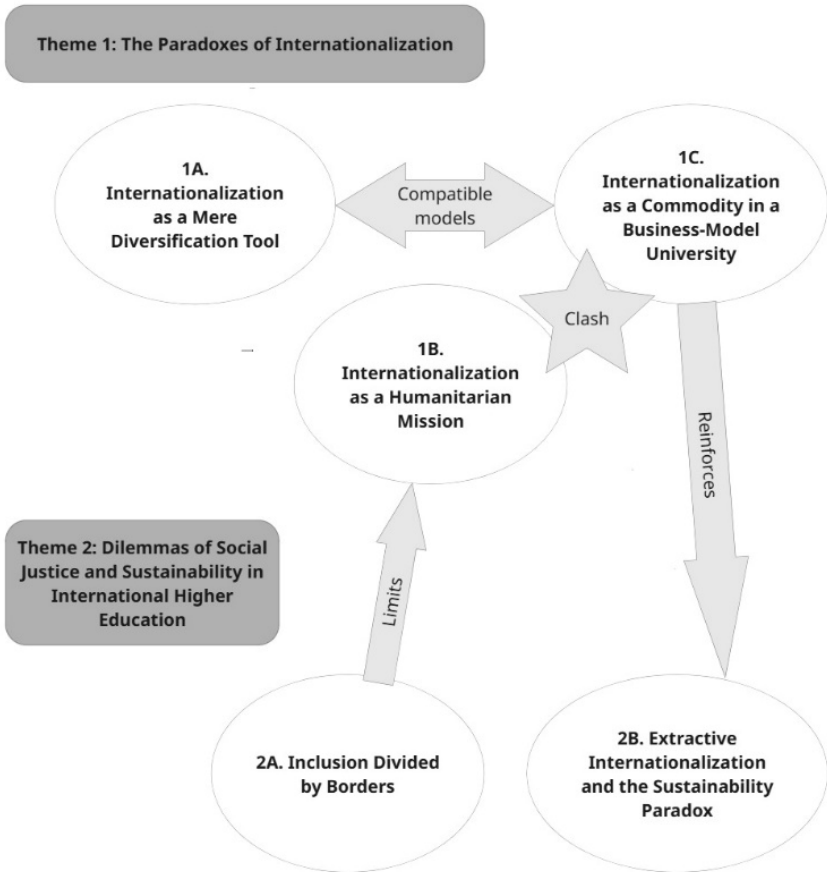


Figure 1: Relationship Between Themes and Subthemes

Note. Conceptual model illustrating the relationships between themes and subthemes in the analysis. Theme 1 captures the paradoxical framings of internationalization as a diversification tool, a humanitarian mission, and a commodity within a business-model university. While diversification and commodification are often positioned as compatible, humanitarian framing clashes with market-driven logics. Theme 2 represents the resulting dilemmas of social justice and sustainability, showing how commodified internationalization reinforces extractive dynamics, while nationally bounded inclusion frameworks limit humanitarian approaches. Together, the figure highlights how competing rationales for internationalization shape institutional practices and constrain more equitable and sustainable models of higher education.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Quotes	Keywords	Codes	Themes	Subthemes	Concepts (Interpretation)	Conceptual Model
<i>“I think diversity and inclusion is part of what [the university] does, but up to recently, it had a narrow focus. (...) What we're doing is now diversifying it, so that we can start to particularly engage with cultures and people from ethnic backgrounds that in the past we never would have had any connection with.” (P9)</i>	diversity, enrichment, global perspectives, mobility, intercultural learning	Diversity internationalization; Global mindset discourse	Theme 1: The Paradoxes of Internationalization	1A. Internationalization as a Mere Diversification Tool	Internationalization viewed primarily in terms of increasing numbers and visible diversity, with limited integration or deeper intercultural engagement.	Symbolic and superficial internationalization
<i>“We're really putting an emphasis on supporting the most vulnerable international students... refugees, asylum seekers. We're trying to change how we think about inclusion to begin supporting the most vulnerable.” (P8)</i>	social justice, vulnerability, refugees, asylum seekers, humanitarian mission	Ethical internationalization; Sanctuary pathways; Widening access	Theme 1: The Paradoxes of Internationalization	1B. Internationalization as a Humanitarian Mission	Framed as offering refuge, solidarity, and global responsibility, especially in the context of asylum seekers and refugees (e.g., University of Sanctuary).	Humanitarian–justice-oriented internationalization
<i>“From a [university] context, internationalization is seen as great from an EDI perspective, but its agenda is more financial than access. (...) It's not unique to [university]. Every university in Ireland and the</i>	revenue, recruitment, market logics, rankings, commodification	Commercial internationalization; Fee dependency; Business-model university	Theme 1: The Paradoxes of Internationalization	1C. Internationalization as a Commodity in a Business-Model University	Driven by market logics, international students are seen as revenue sources, reinforcing instrumental and competitive rationales.	Market-driven internationalization

<p><i>UK is trying to increase funding through internationalization.” (P3)</i></p>	<p>national access, borders, capacity limits, unequal funding</p>	<p>Policy-bounded inclusion; Two-tier support system; Ad hoc inclusion</p>	<p>Theme 2: Dilemmas of Social Justice and Sustainability in International Higher Education</p>	<p>2A. Inclusion Divided by Borders</p>	<p>National social inclusion policies are solid, but focused on domestic students only.</p>	<p>Bordered inclusion regimes</p>
<p><i>“We’ve taken their elite students and charged them full cost [...] Then, we kind of encourage them not to go home... they stay and work in the developed North.” (P8).</i></p>	<p>brain drain, extraction, sustainability, global inequality</p>	<p>Extractive mobility; Global South–North asymmetry; Unsustainable internationalization</p>	<p>Theme 2: Dilemmas of Social Justice and Sustainability in International Higher Education</p>	<p>2B. Extractive Internationalization and the Sustainability Paradox</p>	<p>Highlights the exploitative elements of current models, including brain drain, fee dependency, and the contradiction between access and global equity goals.</p>	<p>Extractive internationalization cycle</p>

Note. The table presents the stages of analysis from empirical data to conceptual interpretation, following Naeem’s structured thematic analysis (2023). By showing one quote for each subtheme, it demonstrates how inductively generated codes were progressively abstracted into subthemes, themes, and an overarching conceptual model.

Theme 1. The Paradoxes of Internationalization

Participants expressed diverse perspectives on how internationalization is understood and enacted within the university context, often reflecting paradoxical meanings and interpretations. While internationalization is widely endorsed as an institutional priority, participants held competing understandings of its purpose and its relationship to inclusion.

Subtheme A. Internationalization as a Mere Diversification Tool

Internationalization is widely celebrated within the university as a vital contributor to campus life, academic development, and institutional identity. Staff consistently described it as central to the university's mission and strategic orientation. As P6 observed, "internationalization is a core goal, and I think in all of our strategies. Having international students is seen as the bread and butter of the university's work. It's an essential part." This institutional alignment was a recurring theme. "You look at the university's strategic plan, internationalization is all over it. (...) This is where all third-level education institutions are going and have been for a long time" (P11).

Beyond strategy, participants strongly valued the pedagogical benefits of internationalization. Cultural diversity was viewed as enriching the learning environment and broadening students' horizons. As P2 reflected,

At every level, the benefits that it [internationalization] brings, it enriches our community. It creates opportunities that weren't there before: language learning, cultural exchange, mobility, partnerships with universities around the world... and professional development for staff and students. They were looking at global perspectives a lot more, and it's really about changing the mindset, positioning themselves globally (...) and that's really powerful.

This framing of internationalization as a transformative educational force emphasizes its potential to foster critical thinking and global awareness. P8 articulated this idea clearly:

I genuinely think there are really important benefits of internationalization, international diversity. If you can get real integration, sharing perspectives, and so on, it really strengthens the critical thinking of students, because they quickly come to understand that there are other ways of viewing the world.

Similarly, internationalization was viewed as a means of building a more multicultural and inclusive campus, particularly through deliberate efforts to engage with underrepresented groups in Irish higher education.

I think diversity and inclusion is part of what [the university] does, but up to recently, it had a narrow focus. (...) What we're doing is now diversifying it, so that we can start to particularly engage with cultures

and people from ethnic backgrounds that in the past we never would have had any connection with. (P9)

While this celebratory tone was dominant, some staff also cautioned against superficial approaches. A focus on visible metrics, such as the number of international students or mobility agreements, can reduce diversity to “representation” rather than to meaningful intercultural engagement. The value of internationalization risks being confined to tokenism, reinforcing decorative multiculturalism. As P8 concluded:

We’re trying to put a much stronger emphasis on making sure that, if you do bring students here, they have a really rich, deep sort of intercultural experience rather than a very kind of shallow one that doesn’t really justify the cost.

In sum, framing internationalization as a “diversification tool” relates to what students learn from “different others” as well as to the development of critical thinking through the incorporation and reconfiguration of perspectives. However, internationalization was predominantly about showcasing differences and celebrating cultural diversity, as these metrics were used to demonstrate its impact, according to our participants. From a critical internationalization lens, this model of internationalization as “diversification” is at odds with a more engaged and transformative internationalization agenda (Jones et al., 2021), such as internationalizing the curriculum or internationalization at home. Staff may see only “superficial” diversity but may be unable to pursue more socially just practices in their engagement with international students.

Subtheme B. Internationalization as a Humanitarian Mission

Participants discussed the ethical practices behind internationalization, extending beyond campus diversification to include justice, solidarity, and global responsibility. This proposes a view of the university as a refuge for students from marginalized, displaced, or conflict-affected backgrounds.

The diversity piece is also about including people coming to us who have additional needs... In the past, we were taking like-minded people, basically those from well-developed countries and relatively wealthy families. That’s ok, but now we’re taking more of a social justice approach, looking to support populations affected by war, famine, or natural disaster. (P9)

This humanitarian framing understands internationalization as a moral imperative, a means of extending educational access and actively including the world’s most vulnerable populations. As P2 puts it, “I really do believe we’ve made huge progress as a university in terms of positioning ourselves as a university with a humanitarian mission... internationalizing in a responsible and inclusive way.”

The most visible expression of this mission is the University of Sanctuary initiative, which supports asylum seekers and refugees through scholarships,

tuition waivers, language support, and other services. It reflects a shift toward a values-driven, inclusive form of internationalization. “We’re really putting an emphasis on supporting the most vulnerable international students... refugees, asylum seekers. We’re trying to change how we think about inclusion to begin supporting the most vulnerable (P8).”

This approach recognizes visible and invisible barriers that sanctuary students face and aims to address them.

Even if your fees are covered, getting here, transport, feeding yourself, buying material, it’s a lot more complex. And also, students sometimes carry trauma from where they’ve been and what they’ve seen... We work closely with our wellbeing team, counseling, and chaplaincy... English not being a first language, financial deprivation, integration issues... We’ve had to really look at how we’re supporting students in those areas. (P3)

However, while the aspiration is strong, participants acknowledged the limits of institutional capacity. Resources are finite, and good intentions alone cannot overcome systemic constraints. “We couldn’t possibly have a policy that we would admit students from anywhere in the world without paying fees... we have no funding to do that (P8).” Instead, the university has adopted a pragmatic approach, prioritizing the most vulnerable while recognizing that lasting change depends on broader policy reform and external partnerships.

Finally, some participants emphasized that humanitarian responses within the higher education sector must be systemic and academic rather than a charity-based model that responds only to emergencies. A particularly reflective quote critiques these responses as unsustainable: “The university needs to be responsible... our responsibility is to stand back and work to our strengths (P9).” These strengths include research, data analysis, policy influence, and systemic action. It is a call to institutional maturity: to contribute not only through immediate aid but also through scholarly insight, structural advocacy, and long-term capacity-building.

This subtheme reveals a deeper, justice-oriented model of internationalization. One that seeks not just to diversify but also to transform lives and rebalance inequities. However, it also exposes the tension between idealism and institutional reality, whereby following a more decolonial version of internationalization demands deeper engagement (Stein, 2022). At this university, the humanitarian model is emerging, but its expansion will require sustained investment, strategic leadership, and alignment with national and global equity frameworks. These findings speak to de Andreotti’s (2014) critique of engaging with internationalization without considering global inequalities and to the difficulty for staff to “do justice” on the ground.

Subtheme C. Internationalization as a Commodity in a Business-Model University

The ideals of internationalization as diversity or humanitarianism often clash with a third dominant framing in the Global North: internationalization as a commercial enterprise. Participants acknowledged a disconnect between the

university's ethical aspirations and the economic reality in which international students are primarily viewed as revenue generators. "There are people who work in internationalization... and others who don't fully understand what it means to be a responsible, internationalized university. They may well see it in monetary terms" (P2).

This commodified model is widely accepted, if reluctantly, as necessary for institutional survival in an underfunded higher education system. International tuition fees are critical to financial viability, even if this dependency raises ethical concerns. "From a [university] context, internationalization is seen as great from an EDI perspective, but its agenda is more financial than access... It's not unique to [university]. Every university in Ireland and the UK is trying to increase funding through internationalization" (P3).

The internationalization agenda is primarily about recruitment and revenue... In contrast, there are national inclusion targets and government schemes for underrepresented domestic students. But on the international front, there's no support. You can charge whatever fees you want, but you must pay for everything yourself. (P8)

Participants described this commercial logic as embedded in the broader shift toward a business-model university. "The university is a business model now. You need to be able to make a business case, drill into your data... CRM systems, governance, policies and procedures. It's really important to where I'm sitting" (P3).

This orientation influences how internationalization is practiced, often reducing its value to institutional prestige and rankings. "The number of international students is counted in our rankings. It's kind of a crude measure of why we value them" (P6).

Scholarships were frequently cited as emblematic of this paradox. Although framed as inclusion tools, they often function as strategic recruitment instruments targeting elite students in growth markets, not those with needs.

Scholarships are really recruitment aids; they're not designed to promote inclusion... You do your analysis, and you could see this potential for growth in, say, Cambodia... So often, the scholarships are designed not to help the individual student as a means and an end, but rather to bring the student over as a means to promote your university... in that source country. (P8)

This appreciation of international students tied to their economic value reflects an uneasy dependency. As one participant explained, financial reliance on international tuition can override ethical considerations:

If [this model] has these negative effects, why is it so entrenched? Because it's basically the crack-cocaine of our sector, if I'm honest. Once you're hooked on it, it's hard to get off. We're doing this because of domestic students... we have various obligations regarding access and other matters for domestic students. Domestic student fees are very

controlled, often below cost. The public subsidies often aren't high enough to compensate. So, if you have a completely unregulated activity like international student recruitment, you can use the profits from that to cross-subsidize both the areas of education that are offered below cost, and you can use it across subsidized research and buildings and facilities and so on. (P8)

This market-driven approach to internationalization risks undermining universities' humanitarian ambitions and reinforcing global inequalities. Our participants question the ethics of internationalization but feel compelled to accept its monetary value. Ultimately, this subtheme exposes an ethical dilemma: a university model that depends on inequitable access to sustain itself while claiming to promote global justice, as further elaborated in the second theme. This finding demonstrates that framing students within a commercialized model results in de facto differential treatment by staff. Fraser (2007) warned against the inequality that results from misframing, and our results support these claims by illustrating the real moral and practical dilemmas of staff at the frontline, who end up discriminating between domestic and international students.

Theme 2. Dilemmas of Social Justice and Sustainability in International Higher Education

Building on the critique of the commodification of internationalization, this theme explores the related tension between social inclusion and internationalization agendas. While Irish universities have made significant progress in access and widening participation for domestic students, these achievements are often sealed off from internationalization efforts, which remain primarily revenue-driven. Our participants discussed how this separation creates fundamental dilemmas around social justice and sustainability, both in policy and practice.

Subtheme A: Inclusion Divided by Borders

Participants consistently praised Ireland's strong national access framework. State-led initiatives, such as the National Access Plan (Higher Education Authority, 2022), and centralized schemes, such as the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route (DARE), have broadened access for students from underrepresented domestic groups. These policies reflect a coherent commitment to equity. However, their impact is confined to those who meet strict residency or citizenship criteria.

"We're in a privileged place in Ireland... [but] that funding does not follow international students," one participant noted (P3). As P11 explained, "We can provide general support to international students... but if somebody needs something more individualized, like a PA or sign language interpreter... we can't use the funding we get from government to support that student."

Participants pointed to a clear structural gap between funded support for "access" students and support available to international students. Staff are then

under pressure to make ad hoc decisions to redirect support, despite a structural lack of resources, to target the inclusion of international students.

Our recruitment is color-blind... So, when you arrived as an international student... let's say you're dyslexic or have a physical impairment... we would support you through our normal services. But we wouldn't be funded, in the sense that it would be sharing the existing resource that was used to fund the target of that support, which was the domestic students. The widening participation agenda is a national agenda, completely hermetically sealed from the internationalization agenda. (P8)

As a result, international students with disadvantages, whether due to disability, trauma, or socioeconomic hardship, often fall outside the scope of national inclusion frameworks. "There's maybe an assumption that socioeconomic disadvantage is not part of somebody's background if they're coming through as an international student," said P11.

This contributes to a de facto two-tier system: domestic students benefit from targeted inclusion strategies, whereas international students rely on internal workarounds unless they access designated pathways, such as University of Sanctuary scholarships. Even then, capacity is limited. "If we do move into that space [of supporting a socioeconomically disadvantaged student from abroad], it's going to take us to a whole other level... but there isn't enough funding" (P11).

Access and participation, then, are shaped not only by disadvantage but also by where a student comes from. "International students are a smaller percentage... we're not necessarily made aware of students who are coming from socioeconomic disadvantage" (P3). Even for those who qualify, "we have no external funding to support that," added P8. "You could imagine a world where we have no fees and can give financial aid to students in need... but we don't have that luxury" (P8).

Participants explained that structural constraints are at play, not a lack of will. "There will always be that tension between trying to support disadvantaged students who are here already versus those coming from overseas... It's down to capacity and the constraints we're given to work with" (P11).

This subtheme highlights a critical tension in inclusive internationalization: while universities may strive for equity, their capacity to act is bound by policy frameworks that target domestic needs. International students are excluded not because they are less deserving but because the system defines inclusion within national borders, which supports Fraser's (2007) theoretical claims and documents how staff find themselves in difficult situations when negotiating privileges and enforcing inequalities among the student body. The challenge is to reimagine responsibility, resource allocation, and access through a global lens (de Andreotti, 2014; Stein & McCartney, 2021). Our data indicate the potential to align these inclusive internationalization efforts with sustainability (SDG4), thereby expanding inclusion beyond national definitions of belonging.

Subtheme B: Extractive Internationalization and the Sustainability Paradox

Beyond questions of inclusion, participants raised concerns about broader sustainability challenges. On one level, universities rely heavily on high-fee-paying international students to subsidize their operations, bringing up worries about institutional financial dependence. On another level, a deeper structural global consequence occurs: international recruitment leading to a brain drain from the Global South to the Global North.

As participants noted, talented students are often drawn from underresourced regions, educated in the Global North, and remain in host countries, resulting in a net depletion of human capital from their home countries. P8 illustrated this paradox:

I've got a student from Wuhan... very smart... she came to our university on a scholarship and went to Yale... She qualified for full financial aid... But where is she now? She is the vice president for an American company. Never gone back to China.

This also calls into question the sustainability of internationalization strategies that primarily serve host countries' interests (e.g., by funding higher education institutions or responding to labor market needs). This narrative reoccurred across interviews. Talented students from the Global South, recruited for their academic excellence and capacity to pay, are drawn into Global North systems where they often remain post-graduation. "We've taken their elite students and charged them full cost [...] Then, we kind of encourage them not to go home... they stay and work in the developed North" (P8).

In his reflection, P8 connected this logic to a colonial past:

Aren't we doing something similar [to colonial slavery]? Are we just seizing their raw materials, which are their young people? Making them pay for it and then keeping them to work for us. So it's almost like the slaves are paying for their own passage and paying to learn how to work on a plantation.

Our data point to the ethical tensions embedded in current internationalization models: they do not promote equitable global development and exacerbate global inequalities, yet they promote national inclusion policies (as seen in Subtheme A). For staff on the ground who support students or lead institutional internationalization and inclusion initiatives, the tension between the need for funding from international students and the inability to support their inclusion in the host society or their return to benefit their home countries feels morally and politically problematic. This echoes previous calls to decolonize internationalization (Stein, 2022) and engage more meaningfully with global inequalities (de Andreotti, 2014). The conflicting agendas result in international students, especially from the Global South, finding themselves excluded from (national) support structures while simultaneously serving institutional revenue goals. "If I were being my own harshest critic," said P8, "you might say

internationalization of northern universities has not only done nothing for sustainable development, it's harmed sustainable development.”

This dilemma is not solely a matter of institutional intent. Many staff members voiced personal commitment to justice and global responsibility. However, they operate within structures that prioritize income generation over long-term partnerships or capacity building. Moving toward a more ethical and sustainable model entails shifting from extraction to collaboration, as articulated in SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). As P8 proposed, “Rather than looking for what we get out of it... [We ask] what’s the benefit for the partner?” Models such as joint degrees, reciprocal exchange, and cocreated research with institutions in the Global South are potential alternatives, centering mutual benefit and respect for local capacity.

In summary, our findings point to how university staff articulate the paradoxes of internationalization within the framework of three separate models (Theme 1, See Figure 1), and they connect these models with specific dilemmas of social justice and sustainability (Theme 2). For them, the conflicts are real and have consequences for how they provide services to students and for how they view the university's role in the world. While internationalization is often promoted as a mechanism for global mobility and mutual enrichment (Theme 1. A), its current structures in the Global North operate within extractive logics that undermine both social justice (Theme 1. B) and sustainable development (Theme 2.B). Inclusion is still defined within national frameworks (Theme 2. A), while internationalization remains driven by market logics (Theme 1.C). Our participants negotiate these paradoxes, indicating not only institutional change but also rethinking how responsibility, funding, and global solidarity are balanced in higher education provision.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated how staff and senior leaders in an Irish University of Sanctuary negotiate the complex, often conflicting, agendas of internationalization and social inclusion. Our findings reveal a nuanced landscape in which internationalization is simultaneously perceived as a tool for diversity, a humanitarian mission, and a commodity (Theme 1), leading to dilemmas of social justice and the ethics of global sustainability within the context of *national* inclusion strategies (Theme 2). These paradoxes highlight a disconnect between the aspirational values often associated with international higher education, which university staff personally endorse, and the pragmatic realities of institutional operations, particularly within a neoliberalized academic environment.

We provide empirical evidence on how Fraser's (2007) concept of misframing impacts the work of university staff, and we demonstrate how they also question and are deeply uncomfortable with the unequal access to support by international students, who are nonetheless financially contributing to the university's financial survival. Our data strengthen the calls to engage in internationalization, which reduces rather than reinforces global inequality and colonial extractive practices (de Andreotti, 2014; Stein, 2021). The novelty of our

data lies in documenting the conflict between institutional priorities and the personal conflicts of university staff who must negotiate their own values regarding social justice and inclusion while striving to provide the best student experience, despite university and national policy constraints. We present concrete evidence that internationalization practice is an ethical and moral struggle for those seeking to implement institutional strategies that clash, such as commercializing internationalization versus engaging in humanitarian missions (See Figure 1, Themes 1. B and 1.C).

The framing of internationalization as a tool for diversity and a humanitarian mission reflects an institutional desire to align with ethical and equitable principles. Participants widely celebrated the pedagogical and social benefits of a diverse campus, a view endorsed by critical internationalization scholars, who emphasize meaningful intercultural engagement beyond superficial metrics (Khoo, 2011; Mittelmeier et al., 2024). In our research context, the university's commitment to the University of Sanctuary initiative exemplifies a values-driven approach that extends education to vulnerable populations. This aligns with calls for an "ethics of care" (Sodhi & Martin, 2023) and more responsible global engagement that prioritizes human rights. However, our findings emphasize the tension between such aspirations and the tangible limits of institutional capacity and funding, echoing the caution that well-intentioned efforts can be constrained by systemic realities (de Andreotti, 2014; Jones et al., 2021). For future directions, we suggest that more attention is given to how individual members of staff end up either disengaging from student support (for example, following national inclusion policies so strictly that international students are not offered an inclusive education) or providing ad hoc support (i.e., resulting in inconsistencies and inequalities in how students receive access, information and actual support within the university) in contexts where institutional priorities are misaligned.

Crucially, these ethical framings often clash with the pervasive understanding of internationalization as a commodity, driven by financial imperatives. Our participants described the university's reliance on international student tuition fees to cross-subsidize domestic operations and infrastructure, a "crack-cocaine" dependency that reflects the entrenchment of neoliberal governance in higher education (Lomer et al., 2018; Mintz, 2021). This commercial logic instrumentalizes diversity, reducing international students' value to their revenue-generating potential. Scholarships, which should be tools for inclusion, are often repurposed as strategic recruitment aids for elite students, further illustrating the commodification of international education and reinforcing the critique that market-driven rationales frequently override ethical considerations (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Our data indicate that university staff are aware of and uncomfortable with working in this unethical context. We provide empirical evidence that the wider philosophical dilemmas around social justice, global inequality, and sustainable education have consequences for everyday practices, and they result in both personal dilemmas for staff and further inequalities among the student population, all dependent on how students are "(mis-)framed" according to their nationality (Fraser, 2007).

An important extension to the previous literature is our empirical evidence on the fragmentation between national social inclusion frameworks and internationalization agendas. While Ireland has robust national access policies (Higher Education Authority, 2022), these benefits rarely extend to international students, creating a de facto two-tier system. This structural exclusion resonates with Fraser's (2007) concept of misframing, in which the boundaries of justice claims are delimited, denying "transnational others" (including international students with diverse needs or socioeconomic disadvantages) full participation and recognition within the institutional community. University staff, despite their personal commitments to justice, are forced to navigate systemic constraints and use ad hoc solutions to support international students who fall outside nationally funded frameworks.

This perpetuates a form of "political death" for these students within the institutional social justice landscape, as their claims for support are not recognized, reinforcing the "false dichotomy" between domestic and international students (Jones, 2017). Institutional structures create separate services that may not reflect the commonalities in challenges/needs of all students. From the student perspective, similar institutional, financial, and immigration constraints have been shown to shape international students' everyday experiences and coping strategies (Wiesel-Brown, 2026). This also resonates with research showing how gaps in institutional equity infrastructure systematically marginalize racialized international students, even within universities that publicly commit to inclusion (Arumuhathas, 2026).

Furthermore, our findings add to the recent literature on the ethically troubled nature of extractive internationalization and its contribution to a broader sustainability paradox. The narratives of talented students from the Global South being "seized" and retained in the Global North were described by one participant as akin to a modern form of "slavery" where individuals pay for their own "passage and training". This echoes the decolonial critiques of asymmetrical power relations in global higher education systems (Stein, 2022; Tikly, 2019). While benefiting host institutions and responding to Global North labor market demands, internationalization exacerbates "brain drain" (Marinoni et al., 2024) and undermines sustainable development in sending countries. The sustainability paradox is striking in our data: while the university supports ecological responsibility and the SDGs, its internationalization model, driven by financial necessity, perpetuates practices that conflict with equitable global development and long-term sustainability. Despite the staff's critical awareness, the institution relies on this model for financial survival, which further puts its staff under pressure and leaves international students excluded from certain support.

This study offers important insight into the institutional conditions that shape international students' lived experiences by documenting how staff involved in internationalization and inclusion initiatives negotiate sometimes conflicting strategic priorities. Previous research has demonstrated that staff and faculty perceptions play a critical role in shaping teaching practices, the provision of support, and the overall academic and social environment experienced by international students (Jin & Schneider, 2019). Our findings extend this work by

showing how staff understandings of internationalization, inclusion, and sustainability translate into structural arrangements, such as funding priorities and eligibility criteria, that condition international students' access to resources and support and ultimately a sense of inclusion and belonging.

The fact that our findings are based on a qualitative sample of 11 participants from a single institution may be seen as a limitation that necessarily constrains claims of generalizability beyond similar contexts: a mid-range Global North university. However, the recruitment of this sample was designed to reflect diversity across key institutional divisions and to focus particularly on the strategic dimensions of those implementing internationalization, inclusion, and sustainability strategies. Therefore, this case study enabled an in-depth examination of the institutional logics, tensions, and practices as they are experienced and negotiated at the individual level by staff members who work with international students.

The university examined shares characteristics with many young, publicly funded universities in the Global North, characterized by strong policy commitments to equity and inclusion but also by an increasing dependence on international student enrollments, which operate within nationally bounded funding regimes. In this sense, the case offers analytic rather than statistical generalizability, providing insights into structural dynamics that are likely to resonate beyond the specific institutional context. The psychological analysis of individual perceptions, narratives, and experiences reveals the personal challenges of university staff whose values and commitment to social justice and sustainability align with the university's strategic ambitions yet are constrained and pressured by legislative and institutional frameworks that limit international students' access to support.

Our findings have implications for policy, practice, and future research on internationalization in higher education. At the national policy level, there is a need to bridge the structural gap between domestic access and inclusion policies and internationalization strategies. Governments and higher education authorities must reconsider how international students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or humanitarian pathways, are incorporated into broader national equity frameworks. This requires moving beyond a revenue-only oriented view and developing integrated funding models that support comprehensive inclusion for all students, regardless of their origin. Aligning internationalization with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), requires policies that promote equitable resource allocation, address the root causes of exclusion and exploitation, and commit to equity and human rights in institutionally embedded practices (Sheridan & Tanaka, 2026). This strategic alignment would significantly reduce the pressure experienced by front-line university staff, who cannot deliver equity and social justice within national and institutional frameworks that unjustly frame international students (Fraser, 2007).

For higher education institutions, the challenge is to move beyond rhetorical commitments to social justice and genuinely operationalize sustainable internationalization (De Wit & Deca, 2020). Institutional priorities, structures,

and resource allocation should be re-evaluated to de-emphasize the commodification of international students and to facilitate staff navigation of ethical dilemmas. Universities should foster greater strategic alignment and collaboration between internationalization, access, and EDI units to ensure that inclusion is not "hermetically sealed" by national borders. Our data indicate that staff struggle to address the needs of international students within a national funding framework that does not allocate resources to them. Beyond the local and practical challenges to promoting the inclusion of international students, our data also suggest that partnerships with institutions in the Global South are essential for advancing global equity and would be endorsed by members of staff who see yet do not want to contribute to increased global inequality and extractive practices in internationalization. This could involve promoting joint degrees, reciprocal exchanges, and cocreated research that build capacity and foster equitable knowledge exchange across all collaborating universities, thereby diminishing the impact of brain drain on sending countries.

This study contributes to the growing empirical understanding of how institutional actors navigate the paradoxes of internationalization and social justice in practice. Future research is needed in several directions: Comparative studies across different national contexts or institutional types would offer valuable insights into how these dilemmas manifest under different policy and funding regimes. Investigating staff's experiences in other contexts, particularly in the Global South, would yield relevant insights into internationalization models and the impact of social inclusion policies in those contexts. Finally, action-oriented research exploring the design and implementation of alternative, sustainable, and justice-oriented internationalization models would be essential for informing transformative change within the sector. Our study indicates that examining how Global North universities implement University of Sanctuary initiatives can provide evidence of the functioning of these alternative models and that staff experiences with these programs can reveal best practices for navigating institutional and ethical dilemmas.

Ultimately, our findings reveal that while there is rhetorical commitment to socially inclusive internationalization, the institutional architecture remains ill-equipped to realize this vision in the Global North university we examined. The prevailing model privileges economic capital and tokenistic diversity over human potential and ethical responsibility. Until universities reconfigure their strategies to align with the transformative imperatives of the SDGs and center inclusion for all students, regardless of origin, internationalization will continue to reproduce rather than resolve global inequities and social inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study advances internationalization research by examining how university staff at an Irish University of Sanctuary navigate the complex, often conflicting demands of internationalization and social inclusion. By shifting the analytical lens from student experiences to the institutional logics and structural conditions that shape them, the analysis reveals a persistent dilemma: international students

are frequently positioned as central to institutional strategy yet remain peripheral to inclusion infrastructures. University staff are under pressure to provide equitable support to international students, yet inclusion frameworks are designed only for national/domestic students. This tension results in fragmented and unevenly distributed support systems, which explains the disconnect between a university's social justice commitments and the support that international students actually receive, leaving the staff to deal with these ethical dilemmas on an individual basis.

To move toward more socially just internationalization, our findings suggest that universities must critically examine how national inclusion programs create de facto two-tier access systems and provide roadmaps and guidelines for staff on implementing equitable and sustainable student support. Furthermore, institutions should develop equity frameworks that explicitly account for international cohorts rather than assuming domestic mechanisms are universally applicable. Ultimately, our research indicates that more socially inclusive internationalization practices require universities to move beyond the commodification logics that reinforce extractive practices in higher education. By making visible the individual dilemmas that shape the everyday practice of university staff, our findings offer a pathway for higher education to align internationalization with sustainable social inclusion.

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