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International Student Mobility in a Peripheral Destination: The Case of Mongolia

Kun Li

National University of Mongolia, Mongolia
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8608-0214>

Zoljargal Dembereldorj

National University of Mongolia, Mongolia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8100-7030>

ABSTRACT: *The limited presence of international students in Mongolia raises concerns about the country's role in global higher education. Guided by an expanded push–pull framework, this study examines the factors influencing international students' choice to pursue tertiary education in Mongolia. Based on semistructured interviews with 25 international students, the key push factors identified include limited academic opportunities, economic hardship, social pressure, political instability, restrictive policies, and personal motivations. Mongolia's attractiveness stems from affordability, accessible admissions, niche programs, and geographic, cultural, and ethnic proximity. The study also highlights facilitating factors—such as family support, social networks, and peer influence—and identifies reverse push–pull dynamics, including infrastructural deficiencies and experiences of social isolation. Recommendations include targeted marketing, enhanced promotion, strengthening niche academic programs, improving international student services, and implementing academic and social integration policies for local and international students. The findings offer insights for stakeholders in Mongolia and other peripheral destinations.*

Keywords: destination choice, international students, Mongolia, peripheral destination, push–pull model

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the internationalization of higher education have significantly expanded global student mobility. The number of students studying abroad increased from 2.1 million in 2001 to 6.9 million in 2024 (Project Atlas, 2024). As shown in Figure 1, although traditional destinations continue to host the majority of international students—collectively 56% in 2024—their market share has declined from 64% in 2016 (Project Atlas, 2024). This trend suggests that as overall mobility increases, more students choose alternative destinations, indicating a diversification of global student flows.

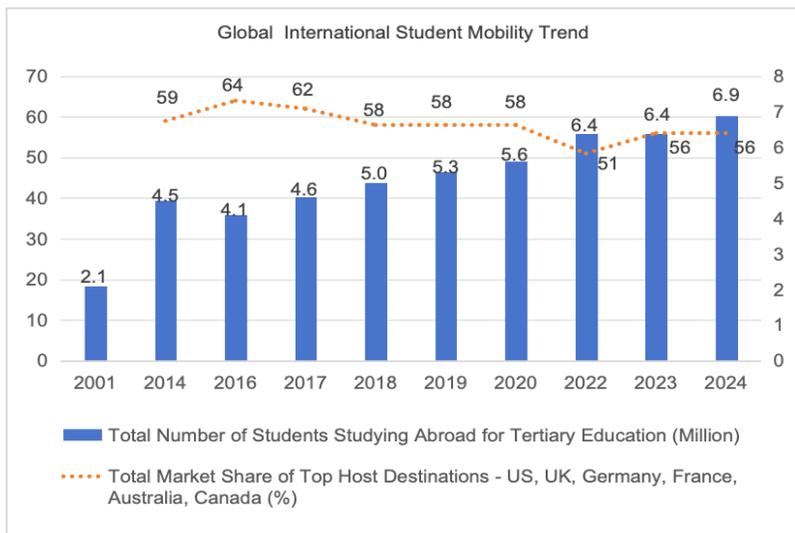


Figure 1: Global International Student Mobility (ISM) Trend

Amid these shifting dynamics, two major mobility patterns have emerged. First, former top sending countries such as China, South Korea, and Malaysia are becoming host destinations (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Second, regional mobility—particularly within Asia—is increasing (British Council, 2024b), reinforced by postpandemic preferences for proximity and stability (Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2023; Mok et al., 2021). Moreover, geopolitical tensions, stricter visa regimes in traditional host countries, and rising nationalist policies have reduced the attractiveness and accessibility of some Western destinations (Amuedo-

Dorantes & Romiti, 2024; British Council, 2024a; NAFSA, 2025). As student preferences evolve, competition for international enrollments continues to intensify because of the economic, academic, and soft-power benefits associated with international students (Beine et al., 2014; Chowdhury, 2022; Times Higher Education, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Mongolia represents a small participant in the ISM market. In 2017, the country hosted 1,520 international students (MECSS, 2017a, as cited in Gundsambuu, 2019). The number declined to 959 in 2019, likely due to early pandemic-related restrictions (Tudevtagva et al., 2023), but rebounded to 3,593 in the 2022/23 academic year (National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2022). Although Mongolia remains a minor destination, recent growth signals development potential. However, unlike other Asian systems that have actively promoted internationalization, Mongolia has seen limited policy attention and remains largely absent from empirical research.

To address this gap, this study explores why international students choose Mongolia as a destination country for tertiary education, using the push–pull model as its theoretical lens. It aims to identify the factors that drive students to pursue their studies in Mongolia. This study fulfills this purpose by addressing the following research questions: What push and pull factors motivate international students to pursue tertiary education in Mongolia? How do these factors shape international students’ choice of Mongolia as a study destination?

This study contributes to the broader discourse by examining a peripheral destination and providing further empirical evidence for the “reverse flow” phenomenon of international students—mobility from more economically developed countries to less developed ones. This phenomenon challenges the conventional assumptions of unidirectional flows from the Global South to the Global North and calls for a more nuanced understanding of mobility patterns. This study provides policymakers and institutions with insights into enhancing Mongolia’s appeal and internationalizing its tertiary education. The findings also have broader implications for other peripheral countries seeking to attract international students.

For the purposes of this study, international students are defined as those who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective of participating in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of the destination of a given student is different from their country of origin (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). Tertiary education encompasses education that builds on secondary education and provides specialized learning in both academic and advanced vocational or professional fields (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Push–Pull Theory of ISM: Critiques and Extensions

The push–pull model, originating from migration theory (Lee, 1966), provides a foundational lens for understanding mobility decisions. In the field of

international education, Altbach (1998) argued that industrialized “center” countries pull students through academic prestige, research capacity, and infrastructure, whereas “peripheral” countries push students outward because of limited academic opportunities and systemic constraints. This underscores the structural advantages enjoyed by center countries in global higher education. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) further developed an ISM model by conceptualizing a three-stage decision process—deciding to study abroad, selecting a host country, and choosing an institution—and defined push factors as unfavorable home country conditions and pull factors as attractive characteristics of destination countries.

Early empirical studies focused primarily on macrolevel determinants. For instance, McMahon (1992) identified economic weakness and insufficient higher education capacity in developing countries as key push forces. However, this framework was soon critiqued for overemphasizing macrolevel conditions. Subsequent scholars incorporated microlevel dimensions—such as family background, academic profile, and personal aspirations—that shape students’ perceived accessibility and desirability of overseas study (Li & Bray, 2007). Recent research highlights the interaction between macro- and microlevel influences, including bilateral relations and scholarships, as well as motivations such as cultural familiarity, curiosity, and peer influence (Ma, 2017; Dembereldorj & Badamdorj, 2018).

Recent work continues to refine the framework. Wu et al. (2021) emphasize that internal motivations and subjective perceptions—such as intellectual curiosity and self-development—are essential for explaining “reverse flows” toward less developed destinations. They also introduce the concept of “igniting motivations,” which refers to contextual enablers that facilitate mobility. The model has additionally been expanded to include reverse push–pull factors. Li and Bray (2007) define reverse push factors as favorable home country conditions—such as strong family ties or improved domestic education—that discourage outbound mobility and reverse pull factors as post-arrival challenges in the host country that undermine students’ satisfaction and retention. Empirical examples include air quality and product safety concerns reported by international students in China (Wen & Hu, 2019) and issues such as the academic hierarchy, social isolation, and language barriers experienced in South Korea (Dembereldorj, 2015).

ISM in Emerging and Peripheral Destinations

Most research on ISM focuses on traditional Western hosts, primarily because of their association with high-quality education (Eder et al., 2010), globally recognized qualifications (Maringe & Carter, 2007), prestigious university rankings (Chen, 2017; Gong & Huybers, 2015), poststudy work opportunities (Chen, 2006; Yang, 2007), and English-language learning environments (Foster, 2014). However, this focus has been critiqued for reinforcing a predominantly Global South-to-North narrative, which is

increasingly inadequate for capturing today's more complex and multidirectional mobility patterns (Cantwell et al., 2009; Jon et al., 2014; Ma, 2017).

Unlike traditional destinations that rely on structural advantages, emerging destinations attract students through distinct pull factors. China and the United Arab Emirates appeal to students through rapid national development and growing regional influence (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Ma, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2019). Similarly, proximity and affordability enhance the appeal of Malaysia and Turkey (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Özoğlu et al., 2015). Policy environments in China and South Korea—featuring flexible admissions, streamlined visa procedures, and generous scholarship schemes—further strengthen their competitiveness (Cai et al., 2024; Wen & Hu, 2019). Sociocultural dimensions such as local hospitality in China (Gbollie & Gong, 2020) and supportive environments in Taiwan (Lee, 2014) also play significant roles. Moreover, recent studies have examined how ethnic, religious, and cultural proximity influence international students' destination choices. Cai et al. (2024) reported that Joseonjok (ethnic Korean Chinese) graduate students in South Korea were motivated by emotional and ethnic affinity with Koreans, as well as prevailing study-abroad norms within their community. Similarly, Nefedova (2021) reported that students from the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic region chose Russia because of cultural and linguistic proximity and the presence of established networks. Students from Muslim-majority countries are similarly drawn to Turkey and Malaysia by shared religious values and cultural familiarity (Özoğlu et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2014). These findings demonstrate that student mobility is influenced by diverse factors beyond prestige alone, offering valuable insights for attracting students to peripheral destinations.

Peripheral destinations—although historically overlooked and lacking the prestige of major hosts—are increasingly attracting international students by leveraging distinct advantages. For example, Latvia draws students through its affordability, political stability, EU membership, and cultural familiarity among learners from post-Soviet countries (Apsite-Berina et al., 2023). In Vietnam, specialized programs such as Vietnamese studies and language training, together with opportunities for cultural immersion, have appealed to many South Korean students (Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2023). Similarly, Thailand has become a compelling choice for American students, motivated by experiential factors such as cultural immersion, travel, and personal growth, alongside practical considerations such as affordability and safety (Rhein & Phillips, 2024).

As a previously unexplored peripheral study destination, Mongolia warrants closer examination amid the growing diversification of ISM. This study is the first to apply the push–pull model to the context of Mongolia, offering new insights into mobility toward peripheral destinations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building on the literature, this study adopts an expanded push–pull framework that incorporates push, pull, reverse, and facilitating factors. Push factors include both macrolevel structural disadvantages in the home country and microlevel

personal motivations, aspirations, and perceptions. Pull factors encompass both the objective benefits of the host country and students' subjective perceptions of its attractiveness. In this framework, perceptions function as both push and pull factors: when the perception concerns the home country or the student's own situation (e.g., perceived limitations, personal dissatisfaction), it functions as a push factor; when it relates to the destination country (e.g., perceived high-quality education), it serves as a pull factor. The framework further incorporates reverse push–pull factors. Extending Li and Bray's (2007) definition, this study conceptualizes reverse push factors as encompassing both favorable conditions in the home country and predeparture subjective or structural barriers—such as negative perceptions of the host country or limited access to reliable information—that discourage outbound mobility. Reverse pull factors refer to postarrival conditions in the destination country that lead to negative experiences. The framework also acknowledges facilitating factors, inspired by the concept of “igniting motivations” proposed by Wu et al. (2021). These are not direct drivers of outbound mobility or destination selection; rather, they play a supportive role in making study in Mongolia more accessible and emotionally manageable.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach. As Yin (2018) notes, case studies are particularly effective for answering “how” and “why” questions about contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when researchers have limited control over events. This approach aligns with the research aim by enabling an in-depth understanding of the motivations and contextual factors shaping students' choices in an underexplored destination such as Mongolia.

Participants

Twenty-six international students were interviewed, with one excluded from the analysis because of limited fluency in English or Mandarin, which impeded clear expression. Consequently, twenty-five participants ($N = 25$) were included in the final analysis. The sample comprised 10 males (40%) and 15 females (60%), aged 18 to over 32 years. The largest group was aged 23–27 (44%), followed by 28–32 (20%), above 32 (20%), and 18–22 (16%). Academic levels included master's (32%), undergraduate (28%), doctoral (28%), and nondegree Mongolian language programs (12%). Most of the studies were in the social sciences (56%), followed by arts and humanities (32%) and medical and health sciences (12%). Fourteen (56%) attended public universities, and eleven (44%) attended private universities. The participants represented eight nationalities: China ($n = 17$, 68%, including seven ethnic Mongolians), Laos ($n = 2$), Japan ($n = 1$), Poland ($n = 1$), Belgium ($n = 1$), Hungary ($n = 1$), Russia (Russian Tuvan, $n = 1$), and Türkiye ($n = 1$).

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The following inclusion criteria were established to recruit reliable and information-rich participants whose perspectives aligned with the study's objective: (a) participants met the definition of international students pursuing tertiary education in Mongolia (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d., 2011); (b) they had completed at least one academic semester to ensure sufficient experience for meaningful reflection; and (c) they possessed adequate proficiency in either English or Mandarin to clearly express their ideas during interviews.

Data collection

To recruit participants, we posted an announcement on the social media platforms RedNote and Facebook. Interested students contacted the researcher to schedule an interview. Semistructured face-to-face interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin and lasted 30–60 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Ulaanbaatar at participants' universities or nearby cafés. The interview questions, which were based on the push–pull framework, explored both macro- and microlevel factors that motivated students to study abroad and attracted them to study in Mongolia. The push-factor questions examined how conditions in students' home countries and personal circumstances shaped their decisions to pursue overseas education. The interviews began with a broad, open-ended question (e.g., “What situations in your home country influenced your choice to study abroad?”) and proceeded with targeted prompts on economic, educational, political, social, and personal dimensions (e.g., “How did the economic circumstances in your home country affect your decision?”). The pull-factor questions similarly explored aspects of Mongolia that attracted students, using both broad and specific prompts. Finally, one open-ended question—“How has your overall experience been studying and living in Mongolia?”—invited participants to reflect on their living and studying experiences, enabling the examination of reverse pull factors. During the interviews, the first author also used follow-up probes and emergent questions to clarify and deepen the responses.

The interviews were audio-recorded using a Keda-Xunfei H1 Pro voice recorder and transcribed via the Xunfei-Tingjian AI application. Transcripts were manually reviewed twice for accuracy. A denaturalized transcription approach (Oliver et al., 2005) was used: grammatical errors and nonstandard accents were standardized, and irrelevant vocalizations were removed, while pauses and meaningful nonverbal cues were retained when contextually significant. All transcripts were managed in ATLAS.ti.25.0.1.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A theoretical (deductive) approach was applied, using the push–pull framework to guide coding under the dimensions of push, pull, reverse push, reverse pull, and facilitating factors. The first author

performed the initial coding, while the second author independently reviewed a subset of the transcripts. Coding decisions and definitions were discussed until consensus was reached, enhancing analytical consistency and credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). To further strengthen their credibility, participants performed member checking to clarify ambiguous meanings. Codes were grouped into categories and refined into final themes through iterative comparison and constant reference to the data, ensuring both theoretical relevance and empirical salience. The coding and theming process was conducted manually, with ChatGPT used as a supplementary tool to assist in categorizing ambiguous content and refining code and theme names.

Researchers' Reflexivity

The first author, a Chinese international student in Mongolia, maintained a reflexive stance to navigate a dual positionality as both an insider—sharing cultural and student experiences—and an outsider as a researcher. This position facilitated rapport and contextual understanding but required continuous self-monitoring to avoid overidentification with participants' experiences. To mitigate bias and safeguard participant autonomy, reflective journaling and interactive techniques were employed, such as clarifying prompts (e.g., "Could you please clarify what you mean by...?" or "Do you mean that...?") to verify meanings rather than guide responses. Participants freely accepted or rejected the first author's interpretations during the interview, indicating their agency in shaping the data. The second author independently reviewed a subset of the transcripts, offering a critical outsider perspective that challenged initial interpretations and ensured that the themes remained grounded in the participants' accounts. This reflexive collaboration enhanced the study's credibility by balancing insider insight with external validation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were provided with an invitation and informed consent form outlining the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and participants' rights before each interview. They were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time or skip any question without consequence. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. To ensure confidentiality, all interview data were anonymized, and personally identifiable information was excluded from the transcripts. The audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the two authors.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present the findings to answer our research questions. It includes push and pull factors, reverse push and pull factors and facilitating factors influencing international students to study in Mongolia.

Push Factors

The data revealed four categories of push factors: educational, personal, economic/social, and political (see Table 1). Among these, educational and personal factors were most prominent, underscoring limited academic opportunities at home and students' aspirations for self-development and independence.

Table 1: Summary of Push–Pull Factors

Category	Theme	Subtheme
Push factors	Educational barriers	Restricted access to preferred academic tracks; academic pressure; dissatisfaction with teaching quality and resources; reduced international study options due to geopolitical tensions
	Individual ambitions and desire for self-development	Career and academic advancement goals; cultural/linguistic and heritage motivations; desire for independence and broader worldview
	Economic pressures and social strain	Economic slowdown; job insecurity; degree inflation; intense competition and psychological stress; ethnic discrimination
	Political instability and restrictive systems	War and instability; corruption; restrictive minority policies
Pull factors	Affordability and economic opportunities	Lower tuition and living costs; work opportunities
	Appeal of Mongolia's higher education system	Accessible and flexible admissions; confidence in educational quality and recognition; manageable academic pressure; specialized and niche academic programs
	Geographic and cultural proximity	Convenience of geographic proximity; ethnic and linguistic affinity
	Relaxed lifestyle and cultural appeal	Slower pace of life; friendly and supportive locals; healthy food;

Political stability and openness	authentic traditional culture; well-preserved natural environment Safe and stable political environment; positive bilateral relations; freedom of expression; open access to media and information.
Supportive networks and companionship	Presence of family or friends in Mongolia; studying with familiar companions

Educational Barriers in Home Countries

This theme captures the academic constraints in students' home countries that motivated them to pursue study abroad.

Restricted access to preferred academic tracks was the most frequently cited factor. As one participant explained, "In China, I took the graduate school entrance exam four times but never passed." Academic stress was significant, as participants described intense coursework and exams that made their lives "pressure-filled." Dissatisfaction with educational quality and opportunities was also influential. Participants criticized traditional, noninteractive teaching—"teacher talks all the time, and students just listen"—along with limited resources and unqualified instructors in Mongolian-language programs at their home universities: "In my university, Mongolian was just taught for show; we had one teacher who didn't even know Cyrillic Mongolian well." For some, geopolitical tensions further restricted study options: "After the Russia-Ukraine conflict, many international exchange programs at my university were canceled."

Individual Ambitions and the Desire for Self-Development

This theme captures individual aspirations, identity formation, and self-development goals that influenced decisions to study abroad.

Academic and career advancement were the most common personal motivations. One participant explained that studying abroad was "to qualify for promotions and salary increases," while others viewed education as "the only path for ordinary people to change their fate." Cultural, linguistic, and heritage motivations also featured prominently. Many participants were drawn to explore Mongolia's "unique culture and way of life" or found its language "beautiful." For many ethnic Mongolians from China, studying in Mongolia was a form of reconnection: "I'm Mongolian but grew up speaking only Chinese... I came to learn my own language." Several participants also emphasized intrinsic motivations such as gaining independence, freedom, and broader perspectives, describing studying abroad as "a chance to move out of my parents' house and be myself" and to "understand more about the world."

Economic Pressures and Social Strain

This theme captures financial hardship, employment insecurity, and social pressures arising from competition and exclusion in students' home countries that pushed them to seek opportunities abroad.

Economic slowdown and social pressure—particularly among Chinese participants—were important motivators. Many participants cited job scarcity, stagnant wages, and degree devaluation, noting that “even a master’s degree no longer gives an advantage for promotion or salary.” Many also described China’s “rat race” culture: “I feel guilty resting for a day, whereas outside China, I can truly relax... feel alive.”

Ethnic discrimination also served as a social push factor. One participant mentioned, “Racism is a significant issue in my home country... I’ve encountered numerous problems because of this.”

Political Instability and Restrictive Systems

This theme covers political unrest and systemic constraints that motivate students to leave their home countries.

One participant noted, “My home country is at war,” adding that dissenters “can be persecuted for their political views.” Another student described pervasive corruption, saying, “to enter medical university, you must pay someone with power.” Another student from Asia criticized education reforms that “replaced Mongolian with Mandarin,” which made exams harder for minority students and reinforced a sense of disadvantage that encouraged them to study abroad.

Pull Factors

Mongolia’s appeal stems from a combination of economic, educational, geographic, societal, cultural, and political advantages, as well as support from personal networks (see Table 1). Affordability, accessible admissions, and geographic proximity were the three most frequently mentioned factors.

Affordability and Economic Opportunities in Mongolia

This theme highlights Mongolia’s economic advantages, particularly its affordability and accessible work opportunities, that make studying there appealing.

Students described it as “cost-effective,” noting “studying in Mongolia costs only about one-tenth of what it would in Europe or Australia.” Financial ease was reinforced by available jobs: “There are jobs in Mongolia, so I don’t need to worry about living costs” and by opportunities to “enrich both academic and professional experience.”

Appeal of Mongolia's Higher Education System

This theme captures the academic features that make Mongolia an attractive study destination. Accessible admission was the most frequently mentioned draw. Participants appreciated flexible entry routes: “admission is application-based... no IELTS needed,” and in some programs, “no preparatory Mongolian is needed.” Several chose Mongolia after facing stricter requirements elsewhere, describing it as “easier to enter and easier to finish.”

Confidence in educational quality was also important. Students cited official recognition—“Chinese authorities recognize Mongolian degrees”—and international collaboration: “Cambridge University works with the National University of Mongolia (NUM), which attracted me.” The formal academic structure conveyed credibility: “There are no holiday-term degrees here; everything follows a standard academic calendar, which makes it feel trustworthy.” Many valued student-centered approaches, noting that teachers “always encouraged me to speak,” which felt supportive.

Many participants also appreciated lighter academic pressure and shorter programs—“no SCI/SSCI publication requirement for PhD students” and “master’s programs take only about one and a half years.”

Finally, niche fields such as Mongolian language, art, and medicine were additional attractions: “My major is Mongolian, so it’s natural for me to study here.”

Geographic and Cultural Proximity

This theme captures the appeal of Mongolia’s geographic and cultural proximity to students’ home countries, which reduces both practical and psychological barriers to studying abroad.

Geographic proximity was frequently mentioned, especially by border-region students or those affected by COVID-19 restrictions: “It took me three days and 28,000 RMB to get home from Italy during the pandemic; with Mongolia, I can leave in the morning and be home by the afternoon.” Ethnic and linguistic ties were also important, particularly for ethnic Mongolian students from China and culturally affiliated groups such as Tuvans from Russia: “We chose Mongolia because it’s closer culturally—Ulaanbaatar feels like my hometown.” For ethnic Mongolians from China, language eased adaptation and supported long-term plans: “Mongolia is close to China, and I have a language advantage, so studying here helps me work and settle here.”

Relaxed Lifestyle and Cultural Appeal

This theme captures the appeal of Mongolia’s relaxed lifestyle, friendly social atmosphere, and cultural authenticity, which together provide a sense of psychological comfort for international students.

Chinese participants appreciated Mongolia’s slower pace as a contrast to China’s high-pressure life, as they noted that “people here face struggles with a

relaxed attitude.” Mongolians were described as “kind and supportive,” and local food was described as “healthy and natural.” Many also admired the country’s scenery and traditions, depicting Mongolia as “beautiful grasslands, unspoiled ecology,” where “traditional culture is still preserved and feels authentic.”

Political Stability and Openness

This theme reflects how the stable governance, positive international relations, and open social environment of Mongolia make it appealing to international students.

Mongolia’s political stability and sense of safety stood out amid global unrest. One student explained, “The political environment here feels safe... In Italy, the Russia–Ukraine war caused social chaos, but there’s no such concern in Mongolia.” A Chinese participant highlighted “a friendly, mutually respectful relationship” between the two countries, with some linking this to career opportunities: “I’m involved in China–Mongolia projects like power and coal transport that benefit both sides and my work.” Others valued Mongolia’s openness—“people can speak out about government issues”—and media freedom: “Here, I can use both Chinese and foreign websites; it feels freer.”

Supportive Social Networks and Companionship

Some participants cited having family or friends in Mongolia and the opportunity to study with familiar companions, which provided “a sense of security” and “someone to look after me.”

Facilitating Factors

Facilitating factors refer to conditions that supported students’ decisions and eased their transition to studying in Mongolia—financially, emotionally, and practically (see Table 2).

Family and social support were the most common enablers: “My parents are my biggest backing, covering tuition and living costs.” Peer influence also reinforced decisions: “Friends already here said the pressure is lower and life is freer,” and “If they could make it here, why can’t I?” Access to reliable information and pathways was another key facilitator, whether through intermediaries—“My aunt at the Ministry told me about an exchange scholarship”—or institutional connections—“Our university sends students to NUM every year; it felt accessible,” and “I got a full scholarship through the exchange program—dorm and fees covered.” A few participants added prior overseas study to make them more confident about adapting to Mongolia. Two Mongolia-specific enablers stood out: prearrival cultural familiarity—“Before coming, I studied Mongolian in China, made Mongolian friends, and visited the grasslands—I already loved the culture”—and prior positive experiences—“I’d been here before; teachers encouraged me and people were friendly, which made me want to return.”

Table 2: Summary of Facilitating Factors

Theme
Family and social support
Peer influence
Access to reliable information and institutional or scholarship pathways
Prearrival cultural familiarity
Prior positive experiences in Mongolia
Previous international experience

Reverse Push and Pull Factors

Reverse push factors refer to home country conditions and pre-departure barriers—such as negative perceptions of the host country, limited access to reliable information, or social discouragement—that initially hindered students’ decisions to study abroad. Reverse pull factors describe unfavorable experiences encountered after arrival in the host country that reduce its attractiveness. Together, these dimensions capture the constraints that shape students’ mobility decisions and post-arrival satisfaction (see Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of Reverse Push and Pull Factors

Category	Theme
Reverse push factors	Negative preconceptions and stereotypes
	Limited access to reliable information
	Family and peer discouragement
Reverse pull factors	Infrastructure and public service limitations
	Cultural and daily life adjustment challenges
	Perceived social isolation
	Higher-than-expected living costs
	Safety concerns (e.g., some incidents of public drunkenness, theft, unfriendly treatment)
	Environmental challenges (air pollution, harsh climate)
	Institutional and administrative barriers
	Language-related academic barriers
	Concerns about education quality
Concerns about degree recognition	

Reverse Push Factors

Many participants described initial hesitation shaped by stereotypes: “My professors studied in Mongolia when it was very poor... they often shared negative experiences, so I had negative feelings before coming.” Several mentioned information barriers due to weak international promotion—“If my teacher hadn’t recommended it, I wouldn’t know these universities existed.” Opposition from family and friends was another barrier, driven by concerns over safety, finances, health, and gender norms discouraging women from studying abroad; as one shared, “It took years to convince my parents.”

Reverse Pull Factors

We identified two categories of reverse pull factors in the data: socioenvironmental challenges and educational limitations.

Socioenvironmental challenges refer to social, cultural, and infrastructural difficulties that hinder international students’ experiences in Mongolia. Students frequently cited inadequate infrastructure and public services—especially “horrible traffic jams” in Ulaanbaatar—along with “inefficient government offices,” “unstable internet,” “poor roads,” and a “lack of multilingual signs.” Cultural and lifestyle adjustments also posed difficulties: “They eat mutton a lot...it makes me dizzy.” Several participants, particularly students from one Asian country and some Chinese students, reported feeling socially isolated: “My Mongolian classmates say I’m from the countryside and don’t know how to make friends.” Many were frustrated by the unexpectedly high cost of living, “often higher than in Japan or the U.S.” Additional concerns included safety issues—such as some incidents of public drunkenness, theft, and unfriendly treatment—and environmental problems such as air pollution and harsh winters.

Educational limitations refer to institutional, administrative, and pedagogical shortcomings that constrain international students’ academic progress and satisfaction. Institutional and administrative barriers were among the most frequently mentioned barriers. Students described “unclear procedures” and “slow responses from university offices,” along with logistical problems such as visa delays caused by administrative inefficiency. Infrastructure deficiencies were also evident, particularly in the student housing “Dormitories were too crowded, with no privacy.” Language barriers posed another major challenge, especially in public universities where instruction was entirely in Mongolian and academic support was limited: “All the courses are taught in Mongolian... it’s too difficult. I regret coming here because there is no support for foreign students.” Concerns about educational quality were also widespread. Participants described language programs as “only three hours a day” and “not challenging enough.” One Chinese participant expressed concern over recent negative cases that raised doubts about “the recognition of Mongolian degrees in China.”

DISCUSSION

This study examines Mongolia as a peripheral destination that attracts a distinct group of international students through niche advantages such as affordability, accessible admissions, specialized academic programs, and geographic and cultural proximity. This differs from traditional destinations that emphasize national and academic prestige (Eder et al., 2010; McMahan, 1992; Nicholls, 2018), as well as emerging hubs that promote development prospects and regional influence (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Ma, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2019). By challenging the unidirectional periphery-to-core narrative, the study provides empirical evidence of emerging “reverse flows” in ISM.

The findings both align with and expand the traditional push–pull framework. While the macrolevel push factors identified—such as political instability, educational barriers, and economic downturns—are consistent with those of previous research (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahan, 1992), the results strongly support Li and Bray’s (2007) assertion that microlevel factors such as family background and academic profile are crucial. For instance, this study revealed that Mongolia’s affordability and accessible admissions particularly appeal to students facing financial constraints or limited academic options, positioning it as a “second-chance” destination. A similar pattern emerges in other peripheral destinations, where affordability represents a crucial pull factor; for instance, both Northern Cyprus and Indonesia attract students through relatively low tuition and living costs (Bayraktar & Yorganci, 2025; Maghfurin et al., 2025).

This study also highlights how microlevel personal and cultural motivations can compensate for peripheral destinations’ lack of the structural advantages typically associated with center countries. Cultural and ethnic proximity was especially salient for ethnic Mongolian and Tuvan students, echoing findings in other nontraditional contexts. For example, Joseonjok (ethnic Korean Chinese) students choose South Korea because of “emotional and ethnic solidarity” (Cai et al., 2024); Thai and Cambodian students select Indonesia for cultural similarity and shared Islamic values (Maghfurin et al., 2025); and Muslim students in Northern Cyprus value a culturally safe and inclusive environment (Bayraktar & Yorganci, 2025). Similarly, the appeal of Mongolia’s relaxed lifestyle and cultural experience aligns with research on “reverse-flow” mobility. For example, American students in Thailand prioritize cultural immersion, regional travel, and personal growth over academic prestige (Rhein & Phillips, 2024). Finally, niche academic programs, that is, local culture-embedded programs (e.g., Mongolian studies and traditional medicine), emerged as important pull factors, mirroring Vietnam, where students are drawn to Vietnamese studies and language programs with specific institutional reputations (Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2023).

Second, this study contributes to the limited research on reverse push–pull factors. While similar dynamics have been noted in contexts such as mainland China (Wen & Hu, 2019) and Hong Kong/Macau (Li & Bray, 2007), this study identifies a broader and more context-specific set of reverse factors. These factors shape both students’ predeparture decisions and postarrival experiences, particularly with respect to Mongolia’s limited infrastructure, low global

visibility, weak support services, and feelings of social isolation. Comparable patterns appear in other reverse-flow settings, such as among Western students in China who reported academic challenges and perceived an “inferior educational environment” (Liu et al., 2022).

Third, this study contributes to the push–pull framework by broadening and empirically grounding the concept of facilitating factors. Consistent with Wu et al.’s (2021) notion of “contextual igniting motivations,” this study shows that certain conditions do not directly motivate student mobility but do enable and emotionally support the decision to study abroad or continue to study in a given destination. In Mongolia’s peripheral context, family encouragement, social networks, and peer influence served as critical enabling mechanisms that reduced uncertainty and eased adjustment.

Implications

Although Mongolia lacks the global prestige or regional soft-power influence of traditional and emerging study destinations, this study demonstrates that it can effectively attract specific student groups by leveraging distinctive advantages such as affordability, accessible admissions, cultural and ethnic proximity, geographic closeness, political stability, and immersive cultural experiences rooted in its nomadic heritage and natural landscapes. These features make Mongolia particularly appealing to students seeking practical opportunities, cultural connections, or cultural and experiential learning. To develop a competitive advantage in higher education for internationalization, strategic promotion should target international student segments while strengthening post-arrival support systems.

However, attracting students alone is insufficient for long-term success without addressing the reverse pull factors that undermine satisfaction and retention. The findings highlight the need to improve international students’ post-arrival experiences, particularly in terms of social integration, administrative support, and daily living conditions. Reports of social isolation, language barriers, bureaucratic inefficiency, and limited institutional support point to the need for proactive, inclusive measures to improve the experience of international students in Mongolia. Universities should foster intercultural engagement through effective internationalization policies, intercultural training for staff and domestic students, and peer-mentorship initiatives that connect local and international students. Strengthening administrative services is equally vital; for example, establishing dedicated international student offices, expanding multilingual information access, and ensuring transparent, responsive procedures would ease transitions and reduce uncertainty. Improving campus facilities, safety measures, and prearrival information would further help manage expectations and enhance quality of life.

These implications extend beyond Mongolia. Many peripheral and emerging destinations share similar constraints. The Mongolian case illustrates that such contexts can attract international students by emphasizing pragmatic advantages, regional ties, and niche academic advantages. However, long-term

competitiveness depends on parallel investment in social support, institutional capacity, and inclusive campus environments. Rather than treating support structures as secondary, emerging destinations should view them as integral to their internationalization efforts in higher education, such as English-mediated courses for more academic inclusion and support systems such as buddy programs with local students for collaboration opportunities and multicultural understanding. Strengthening both attraction strategies and support systems will enhance student satisfaction, retention, and reputation over time.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the study findings. First, as an initial exploration, the qualitative case study and purposive sample of 25 participants limit generalizability. The participants in this study do not necessarily represent the views and experiences of the same country of origin, as each student's perspective and experience can vary depending on other factors. Future studies should use larger, more representative samples and probability sampling to validate and extend the results. Second, interviews conducted only in English and Mandarin may have excluded students who were less proficient in these languages; multilingual data collection is advised. Third, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, which could be mitigated through quantitative or mixed-method approaches. Finally, this study focused on country-level destination choice; future research could also examine institutional selection within students' decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

This study applied an expanded push–pull framework to examine international students' motivations for choosing Mongolia, revealing distinctive “reverse-flow” mobility toward a peripheral destination. In the absence of structural advantage, Mongolia attracts students through a combination of pragmatic and contextual advantages that align with their financial, academic, and cultural circumstances. To enhance competitiveness, Mongolia should strengthen targeted recruitment and promote its niche strengths while addressing postarrival challenges that affect student satisfaction and retention. Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that peripheral destinations can successfully attract international students by leveraging contextual advantages while they invest in inclusive and supportive institutional environments. As the first empirical investigation of ISM in Mongolia, this research provides new insights into an underexplored context and contributes valuable implications for future studies on mobility to peripheral destinations.

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Author bios

KUN LI is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education, School of Arts and Sciences, National University of Mongolia. Her research interests focus on international student mobility and international student acculturation.
Email: thisisaileen@126.com

ZOLJARGAL DEMBERELDORJ, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education, School of Arts and Sciences, National University of Mongolia. Her research interests include educational quality, plagiarism in education, diversity in higher education, experience as learning, racial and cultural relations in education, and research ethics in social science.
Email: zoljargald@num.edu.mn
