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Knowledge as a global public good: Universities and inclusive development in the Global South

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines higher education and knowledge as Global Public Goods from a Global South perspective, arguing that their roles in development, inclusion, and innovation cannot be fully understood through dominant liberal internationalization frameworks shaped in the Global North. It asks how knowledge and internationalization can be rethought to challenge academic dependency and reposition universities as infrastructures for inclusive development. Using a Global Public Goods framework, the analysis focuses on four dimensions: (a) trajectories of internationalization, (b) universities as catalysts for development, (c) student mobility and repatriation as mechanisms to convert mobility into domestic capacity, and (d) state leadership and public financing in higher education, science, and technology. Drawing on qualitative analysis from China, Argentina, and Brazil, the study finds that state investment strengthens research capacity, while internationalization remains tied to Global North circuits of recognition. It concludes that recentering knowledge as a Global South public good is essential to reposition universities for equitable, sovereign, and development-oriented internationalization.*

Keywords: Global Public Goods, Higher Education, Internationalization in the Global South, Return Migration, Knowledge-Based Development, China, Argentina and Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

The Global South is a geopolitical and socioeconomic construct encompassing countries primarily located in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, referring not only to geographic regions but also to societies historically situated at the periphery of the global social order, shaped by centuries of colonialism, global capitalism, and imperial expansion since the sixteenth century (Deb et al., 2025). Rather than being a neutral descriptor, the concept foregrounds structural inequality and power relations, reflecting a shared historical condition of structural marginalization, marked by systemic poverty, limited access to quality education, technological dependence, weak infrastructure, and vulnerability to external and internal economic shocks. These enduring asymmetries constrain autonomous development and reinforce unequal integration into global economic and knowledge systems. This shifts the analysis away from developmentalist and culturalist perspectives toward a critical focus on global power relations and structural inequality, underscoring these countries' disproportionate exposure to the inequities rooted in global economic and knowledge systems (Aynaoui et al., 2023; Hogan & Patrick, 2024; Zhou, 2024).

In the Global South, education in general and higher education in particular are pivotal for national development, social mobility, and expanding collective capacities to address structural inequality. However, the potential of tertiary institutions—particularly large public research universities—to drive social and economic progress in ways aligned with social justice and public purpose remains underutilized or insufficiently recognized in policy frameworks (Marginson, 2012). At the same time, higher education can support students' self-formation, and the common good, or the role of education as a public good, is subsumed under individual benefit, something that occurs in liberal societies, particularly in the Anglosphere (Marginson, 2026). International student mobility has largely privileged elite students, offering individual returns in the form of skills acquisition and labor-market advantages, with mobility flows predominantly running from the Global South to the Global North. However, mobility can also function as a space for collective learning and knowledge production, particularly when it strengthens South–South collaboration and fosters more reciprocal academic relations. This perspective connects to the *Sábato–Botana triangle* (state–productive sector–science/technology), highlighting how public universities can leverage student mobility and international partnerships to link learning and research to national development priorities and innovation oriented toward the public good rather than market logics, especially in Global South contexts.

Conceiving higher education and knowledge as global public goods underscores their capacity to reduce deep socioeconomic disparities by fostering social mobility, strengthening human capital, and promoting scientific innovation and knowledge creation aligned with national and regional priorities (UNIDO, 2008). This framing emphasizes universal accessibility, public funding, and strong state responsibility in regulation and provision (Agarwal, 2023; Kaul et al., 2003; Memedović, 2008; Stiglitz, 1999), serving to correct market failures that

limit equitable access and to generate long-term developmental spill overs across borders (Bocalandro & Villa, 2009; González, 2006). Achieving these goals requires coordinated global and regional cooperation on higher education policy to promote knowledge exchange and address structural inequalities.

Global knowledge production continues to be structured around criteria of quality and legitimacy largely defined in the Global North, privileging research agendas, standards, and outputs generated in core countries and reinforcing center–periphery hierarchies and uneven epistemic authority (Connell, 2013; Dados & Connell, 2012; Tickly, 2004). This hierarchy is reinforced by academic dependency, whereby Global South research is often evaluated through Global North agendas, theories, and validation systems, reproducing center–periphery patterns in knowledge production (Alatas, 2003). Within this configuration, international student mobility and persistent brain drain often operate as defining features of periphery-to-center internationalization, concentrating skilled human capital and scientific capacity in the Global North (Bauschke-Urban & Dedgioni, 2025; Carrington & Detragiache, 1999; Docquier, 2014).

While knowledge and higher education are widely framed as global public goods, these framings are largely articulated from Global North perspectives. This article advances the notion of Global South public goods to emphasize how their production, circulation, and benefits of knowledge are shaped by historically unequal power relations. International mobility patterns, training pathways, and publication circuits continue to shape who produces knowledge, whose standards are recognized, and who benefits, sustaining uneven distributions of developmental gains within the global knowledge economy (Andrés, 2020). Reframing knowledge as a Global Public Good from the Global South therefore requires anchoring its production and circulation in Southern priorities, local realities and regional integration while ensuring more equitable participation in global knowledge systems. This perspective links higher education to sovereignty, inclusion, and innovation and calls for internationalization strategies that move beyond asymmetric North–South models toward reciprocal and solidarity-based frameworks prioritizing epistemic diversity, South–South cooperation, and alignment with local development agendas (Finardi, 2021; Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Leal et al., 2022).

This article brings together three complementary theoretical lenses. Global public goods (GPG) theory provides the normative foundation for understanding knowledge and higher education as collective goods that require public investment and coordination beyond market logics (Kaul et al., 2003; Stiglitz, 1999). Postcolonial and Global South scholarship problematizes how the production, validation, and circulation of knowledge are shaped by historical power asymmetries and academic dependency (Alatas, 2003; Connell, 2013). Internationalization theory then serves as the analytical bridge between these perspectives, allowing student mobility and cross-border cooperation to be examined as policy mechanisms that can either reproduce or contest unequal knowledge hierarchies, depending on how they are governed (Perrotta, 2016; Tickly, 2004). Together, these frameworks enable an integrated analysis of international student mobility as a site where knowledge, power, and development

intersect in the Global South. These theoretical perspectives inform the research question and guide the comparative analysis.

The article asks how knowledge and internationalization can be rethought as Global South public goods and is organized around four analytical dimensions: internationalization trajectories, universities and development, mobility and return, and state leadership and public financing (Marginson, 2012; Pisani et al., 2025; Zha et al., 2019). China illustrates how sustained state investment and strategic internationalization can strengthen domestic knowledge capacity while remaining embedded in Global North-centered circuits of recognition, while Argentina and Brazil highlight how policy instability and uneven investment constrain universities' developmental roles. Together, these cases expose a central challenge for the Global South: leveraging internationalization to expand knowledge as a public good while resisting persistent forms of academic dependency. From this perspective, higher education is framed not as a site of global competition but as a key institutional space for inclusive development, capacity building, and more equitable participation in global knowledge systems.

This study advances research on international students by shifting the analytical focus from individual mobility outcomes toward the structural conditions that shape who can access internationalization, under what terms, and with what collective effects. Rather than treating international students as isolated actors within a competitive global market, the article situates student mobility within broader policy regimes, funding structures, and knowledge hierarchies that condition international student experiences in the Global South. By linking internationalization strategies, state investment, and return policies to patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and reintegration, the study demonstrates how international student trajectories are shaped not only by personal choice but also by institutional and geopolitical arrangements. This approach extends international student research beyond adaptation and employability, foregrounding questions of equity, access, and developmental impact as central to understanding international student mobility in unequal global contexts.

The following hypotheses were proposed:

- H1: Internationalization frameworks shaped by Global North standards tend to reproduce unequal access to international student mobility and constrain the production and circulation of knowledge as a global public good in the Global South.
- H2: When internationalization is embedded in strong state leadership, public investment, and return policies, international student mobility is more likely to contribute to knowledge production as a Global South public good, supporting inclusive and development-oriented outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global public goods (GPGs) are defined as goods and services that are both non-rivalrous—meaning that one individual’s consumption does not reduce availability for others—and nonexcludable, in that no one can be effectively prevented from accessing or benefiting from them. Moreover, their benefits extend across national borders, generating positive externalities at a global scale (Agarwal, 2023). GPGs encompass a wide range of domains, including international economic stability, global security, environmental sustainability, humanitarian assistance, and knowledge, and their “global” character foregrounds the shared responsibility of the international community (Stiglitz, 1999).

Knowledge is widely recognized as a global public good and a cornerstone of sustainable development. This entails collective responsibility for its production and dissemination, particularly to support less developed countries. In institutional terms, however, this collective responsibility is mediated primarily through the state, which remains the most robust mechanism for authorizing, financing, and safeguarding public provision at scale. According to Stiglitz (1999), the state plays a pivotal role in the provision of such goods, as they are unlikely to be adequately supplied by market forces alone; national public goods, in particular, provide a fundamental justification for collective action and active governmental involvement, with efficiency often requiring public provision financed through compulsory taxation to address free-rider problems.

A persistent challenge in framing knowledge as a GPG lies in the structural inequalities that shape its production, not only its distribution. While the benefits of knowledge may be widely consumed, many individuals and societies—particularly in the Global South—remain systematically excluded from contributing to its creation and from defining what counts as legitimate knowledge. Student mobility is a key dimension of the global knowledge economy, and its benefits are often captured as private gains (credential advantage, labor market positioning) rather than treated as collective capacity building (Marginson, 2026). However, mobility can also function as a mechanism for the creation, circulation, and transformation of knowledge as a global public good when it supports reciprocal learning, shared research agendas, and the formation of reflexive, culturally situated subjects who can mediate between knowledge systems. In this sense, universities play a central role not only in knowledge production but also in the cultural and social formation of persons, shaping how knowledge is defined, valued, and mobilized across borders as a shared good. This role has been increasingly distorted by neoliberal frameworks that reduce higher education to individual human capital and employability. Marginson (2026) argues that this distortion is especially pronounced in the Anglosphere, where higher education is institutionalized within a neoliberal state rationality that prioritizes capital accumulation over nonpecuniary public purposes; here, we treat this as a defining feature of Global North political economy rather than a universal model.

From a decolonial perspective, dominant Global North—particularly English-speaking—higher education systems have largely failed to sustain an

understanding of universities as public institutions embedded in social compacts and development projects. Instead, higher education has been increasingly subordinated to market logics and the demands of the global knowledge economy, privileging private returns, prestige, and competitiveness over collective social needs (Andrés, 2020; Kaul et al., 2003; Shields, 2013; Velásquez González, 2009; Zhatkanbaeva et al., 2012). Rather than treating this as a neutral policy shift, the literature shows it as a structural narrowing of what counts as “value” in higher education: public purposes are redefined as measurable market outputs, and internationalization becomes aligned with reputation and revenue rather than shared social responsibility. This critique underpins the present analysis; in the Anglosphere, the neoliberal state’s orientation toward capital accumulation limits the capacity of higher education policy to prioritize common goods, even when public rhetoric endorses them (Marginson, 2026).

This structural critique also addresses a central gap in global public goods debates, while the theory clarifies why knowledge should be collectively provided, it is often less explicit about how internationalization governs the cross-border production and circulation of that knowledge. In this article, internationalization is treated as a key policy mechanism through which knowledge moves, is validated, and becomes unevenly accessible—especially through student mobility, training pathways, and publication circuits.

Positioning ourselves in a critical Global South scholarship, we argue that dominant circuits of theory-making, agenda-setting, and validation are concentrated in Global North institutions, which tend to universalize their concepts and standards while positioning Southern contexts as “case material” rather than sources of theory (Alatas, 2006; Connell, 2013, 2020). This condition, defined as *academic dependency* (Alatas, 2003), means that Global South knowledge systems are subordinated to Global North research agendas, theoretical frameworks, and standards of recognition, reproducing a center–periphery division in global knowledge production. Crucially, the issue is not only unequal “access” to knowledge but also unequal authority over what counts as knowledge and which problems deserve research attention. This dependency operates through six interconnected mechanisms: dependence on ideas, media of ideas, educational technology, research and teaching aid, investment in education, and Western demand for skills (including brain drain and “remote” brain drain). Marginson (2018) notes that the expansion of higher education has been central to modernization and development, with research-intensive universities advancing global science through collaboration, knowledge production, and participation in international networks. Although critiques of public investment focus on unequal benefits, the central issue is the quality, governance, and financing of higher education systems, since scientific and technological capacity drives development and requires domestic investment and state support for knowledge transfer and dissemination (Stiglitz, 1999). However, the literature also shows a persistent tension: international networks often amplify Global North agenda-setting and evaluation systems, so “participation” can deepen dependency unless governance and reciprocity are actively built into cooperation.

Framing knowledge and higher education as global public goods from a Global South perspective makes academic dependency visible as a governance problem, showing how internationalization can reproduce Global North agendas unless Southern priorities shape what knowledge is produced, recognized, and circulated. Given weak private incentives, sustained state leadership is essential to secure public funding, regulation, and alignment with inclusive development goals, positioning universities as hubs of knowledge production and social mobility (Marginson, 2012; UNIDO, 2008). This reframes student mobility from an individual opportunity to a public policy arena concerned with access, terms of movement, and domestic capacity-building. In China, higher education is conceived as both a local and global public good through strong state coordination (Tian & Liu, 2018), while in Latin America, its public good framing has been advanced through academic and regional advocacy, notably the CRES declaration framing it as a right linked to equity, development, and regional integration (UNESCO-IESALC, 2008) alongside regional public goods approaches emphasizing universal access and coordinated provision (Bocalandro & Villa, 2009; González, 2006).

In the Global South, definitions of internationalization in higher education are often framed within conceptual models originating in the Global North. From Southern perspectives, these processes are examined through the lens of structural power asymmetries, epistemic hierarchies, and uneven benefits embedded in dominant models. Such dynamics produce what Tickly (2004) terms *dependent internationalization*, embedded in broader patterns of neo-imperialism that perpetuate academic dependency, knowledge extraction, and brain drain, rather than fostering equitable collaboration or sustainable capacity-building. As Perrotta (2016) observes, hegemonic models reproduce a center–periphery logic, privileging mobility to elite institutions, publication in English-language journals, and alignment with Northern standards—frequently at the expense of local knowledge systems and development priorities.

In practice, internationalization in the Global South often functions as a predominantly unidirectional flow of students, resources, and recognition toward the Global North, reinforcing structural asymmetries and colonial patterns of knowledge circulation (Alatas, 2003; Connell, 2013). This is where Global Public Goods (GPG) theory intersects directly with internationalization, cross-border flows do not automatically generate shared benefits but can instead concentrate symbolic and material gains in core institutions, calling for a redefinition of internationalization from Global South perspectives that challenges these dominant frameworks (Finardi, 2021; Leal et al., 2022; Tickly, 2004). Mobility remains concentrated in destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Germany (OECD, 2021), positioning Global North institutions as primary beneficiaries, while public-good outcomes are often subordinated to individual returns and institutional competitiveness. Analytical frameworks for internationalization are thus still predominantly shaped by Northern perspectives, with limited attention to models designed from and for the Global South.

While international student mobility was initially conceived as a form of cultural exchange and mutual learning, universities have increasingly operated as gatekeepers of unequal knowledge flows, with mobility reinforcing academic dependency by channeling Global South students into Global North institutions where theories, standards, and validation are set—positioning Southern universities as transmitters rather than producers of knowledge (Alatas, 2003, 2006; Connell, 2020; Dados & Connell, 2012; Quijano, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the structural vulnerability of Global South international students, while post-pandemic mobility has been largely reframed to reinforce Global North recruitment and market strategies (Rickert, 2025).

A related dynamic from hegemonic internationalization that shows asymmetries in global knowledge production and innovation is persistent “brain drain”: the emigration of highly skilled professionals from the Global South to the Global North, which consolidates scientific and technological capacity in host countries (Docquier et al., 2007; Rasamoelison et al., 2021). Responses vary: some emphasize regional scientific networks to reduce talent loss and support endogenous development (Didou Aupetit & Etienne, 2009), while others frame “brain circulation” as potentially beneficial for both the North and South when governed through equitable frameworks (Bauschke-Urban & Dedgioni, 2025). In contrast, “brain gain” policies promote the return and reintegration of internationally trained scientists to maximize knowledge transfer, technological upgrading, institutional capacity-building, and even participation in policy design (Gascón Muro & Cepeda Dovala, 2009; Wang et al., 2024). Universities can strengthen returnees’ employability and developmental impact through culturally responsive reflection, work-integrated learning, targeted career support, and curriculum-based skill development (Xu et al., 2025).

An alternative paradigm links internationalization to the expansion of social rights and the democratization of knowledge, framing it as a Global South public good rather than a market strategy (Beneitone, 2022; Deb et al., 2025). However, dominant internationalization remains governed by market-oriented logics that prioritize competitiveness, global rankings, and student recruitment, weakening the public-good mission of Global South universities (Stromquist, 2007). As a result, student mobility continues to flow largely South–North, and access to international study and recognition remains uneven, with persistent structural barriers limiting participation by Global South students even as their numbers grow in Global North graduate programmes (Aggarwal et al., 2025). This pattern reflects the core claim of H1: when internationalization is shaped by Global North standards and market incentives, it reproduces unequal access and constrains knowledge as a Global Public Good. In contrast, the literature points toward the need for state-led, development-oriented governance—aligned with H2—to reorient internationalization toward equity, reciprocity, and inclusive knowledge production.

In this article, we propose a Global South public goods approach to internationalization that brings together Global Public Goods (GPG) theory, the Sabato–Botana innovation triangle, and postcolonial critiques of academic dependency. GPG theory provides the normative basis for understanding

knowledge and student mobility as collective goods whose benefits extend beyond individual returns and therefore require public governance and coordination. Postcolonial scholarship clarifies why these benefits are unevenly distributed, showing how dominant internationalization models—structured around Global North standards of excellence—reproduce hierarchies in recognition, access, and mobility. The Sabato–Botana triangle then operationalizes this critique by highlighting how universities, the state, and productive sectors can be institutionally aligned to convert internationalization and student mobility into development-oriented knowledge capacity rather than outward human capital loss.

METHOD

This study uses a comparative qualitative design based on documentary analysis. It examines how knowledge and higher education function as Global South public goods and how internationalization – particularly international student mobility – shapes who produces knowledge, how it circulates, and where its benefits increase. The guiding research question is as follows: *How do internationalization and student mobility shape knowledge as a global public good in the Global South, and how does state leadership enable universities to support inclusive development?*

The analysis compares China, Argentina, and Brazil, selected for their contrasting configurations of state leadership, policy continuity, and investment in higher education and science, alongside shared conditions of inequality and asymmetric integration into global knowledge systems. China represents a high-investment, state-led trajectory that expands research capacity while remaining embedded in Global North–oriented mobility and validation circuits. In contrast, Argentina and Brazil reflect lower and more unstable funding environments but display efforts to frame higher education and knowledge as nationally situated public goods oriented toward social development, with this orientation more pronounced in Argentina than in Brazil, where international standards and norms retain greater influence. Argentina and Brazil illustrate how policy volatility and fragmented innovation systems constrain the equity and developmental returns of internationalization. This comparison allows examination of how different governance arrangements shape mobility outcomes and knowledge as a public good.

The analytical framework draws on three complementary elements. Global public goods theory frames knowledge and higher education as collective goods requiring public investment and governance (Kaul, 2021; Stiglitz, 1999). A Global South and postcolonial perspective highlights how academic dependency and center–periphery hierarchies shape who is mobile, whose knowledge is validated, and how benefits are distributed (Alatas, 2006; Connell, 2013; Dados & Connell, 2012). Internationalization theory links these dynamics to student mobility, training pathways, and return policies as mechanisms that can reproduce or contest inequality (Finardi, 2021; Leal et al., 2022; Perrotta, 2016; Tickly, 2004). Together, these lenses position student mobility as a structurally governed

process with equity and development implications rather than an individual choice.

Empirically, the analysis draws on policy and legal documents, national education and science budgets, governmental reports, strategic plans, academic literature, and regional declarations. Documents were purposively selected to capture key instruments related to internationalization, mobility, return policies, and public financing, aligned with the article's four analytical dimensions. Data were thematically coded using a combined deductive–inductive strategy, and findings were validated through cross-document and cross-case comparison.

DISCUSSION

From a critical perspective, dominant internationalization models have been criticized for privileging competition, elite mobility, and neoliberal market logics over inclusion and developmental goals, often marginalizing Global South priorities. Consistent with the literature review, conceiving knowledge and higher education as public goods is central for the Global South because it reframes internationalization away from market-driven visibility and prestige and toward inclusive capacity-building and development-oriented knowledge production. From this standpoint, the article advances a Global South public goods perspective as a response to dominant internationalization models, academic dependency, and externally imposed standards of excellence defined in the Global North. The discussion follows four analytical dimensions: (a.) internationalization trajectories, (b.) universities as development catalysts, (c.) mobility and repatriation, and (d.) state leadership and public investment, showing how international student mobility operates as a key mechanism through which knowledge is produced, validated, and redistributed (H1–H2).

a. Trajectories of Internationalization

China's internationalization trajectory is deeply intertwined with the economic transformation associated with the Reform and Opening-up, where higher education expansion and national development have been mutually reinforcing. Enrollment rose from under 10% in 1998 to over 20% by 2006, marking the transition from an elite to a mass system and contributing to social mobility while also intensifying labor market competition and demand for postgraduate training (Yao et al., 2010).

Investment in education increased sharply, from 3.65% of GDP in 2010 to 8% in 2012, reaching between 4% and 2% by 2022, while higher education institutions reached 3,074 by 2023 (Zha et al., 2019). State-led strategies, such as Project 211 and Project 985, concentrated resources in selected universities and strategic fields, enhancing institutional capacity and linking higher education more directly to development objectives. Analytically, China shows how internationalization can be governed as a state-aligned strategy that combines outward mobility, inbound recruitment, partnerships, and returnee policies with domestic capacity building (Wang et al., 2024; Zha et al., 2015, 2019).

At the same time, China's internationalization has been pursued through benchmarking against Global North standards and the pursuit of global competitiveness. Since 2004, global outreach has been strengthened through cultural diplomacy, government scholarships, and university alliances, attracting degree-seeking students (Pan, 2013; Sun, 2023). These initiatives link mobility, joint research, and codeveloped curricula to broader human capital formation and infrastructure investment (Lien & Miao, 2023). Chinese outbound student mobility remains a key channel of China's internationalization, with large cohorts still concentrated in Global North hubs (US/Canada/Australia/UK) (IIE, 2024; OECD, 2025), even as China's domestic doctoral output has expanded rapidly. Post-COVID shifts suggest some diversification in destinations (Mok et al., 2021), but overall patterns still point to capacity-building through mobility coexisting with Global North-centered circuits of training, recognition, and epistemic authority, aligning with the tension anticipated by H1.

In Latin America, Argentina's trajectory is distinctive for sustaining a tuition-free public university system that has historically functioned as a mechanism for social mobility. Since the early twenty-first century, improvements in economic performance, wealth redistribution, poverty reduction, and higher levels of economic activity have broadened access to universities, with 17 new public universities established, benefiting disadvantaged sectors and enabling access to first-generation students from low-income families. In mobility terms, Argentina exhibits a predominantly inbound pattern: its public university system attracts more international students (mainly from Latin America) than it sends abroad, positioning higher education as a regional public good (Fernández Lamarra et al., 2018, 2019). According to the Educational Financing Law, the country allocates 6% of the GDP for education. However, recurrent political and macroeconomic volatility has limited policy continuity—downgrading the Ministry to Secretariat—in recent decades and weakened long-term planning for internationalization, limiting institutional continuity, discouraging long-term planning, and weakening the state's capacity to sustain a coherent developmental strategy for higher education internationalization.

Brazil presents a different configuration: while public higher education is tuition-free, access has remained stratified, and massification occurred largely through private-sector expansion. The 2014 National Education Plan set targets to raise education spending to 7% of GDP by 2019 and 10% by 2024 (Barreyro & Costa, 2015). Public expenditure on education rose from 5.84% of GDP in 2003 to 6.31% in 2016 but fell short of the 2019 goal, declining to 5.96% in that year and further to 5.77% in 2020—under Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. Internationalization has been strongly outward-oriented and skewed toward the Global North, with programmes such as *Ciência sem Fronteiras* prioritizing placements in Europe and the United States, reinforcing dependence on Northern training circuits and standards of recognition (Granja & Carneiro, 2021).

Taken together, the cases show that internationalization trajectories structure higher education as a public good in different ways. China combines state-led capacity-building with continued embedding in Global North circuits of validation; Argentina's inbound mobility reflects a regional public-good logic

grounded in access but constrained by discontinuity; Brazil's outward mobility reinforces Northern training pathways despite national expansion. Across the three cases, mobility is not merely movement: it is a governance mechanism that shapes who accesses internationalization, where knowledge is validated, and how developmental gains are distributed (H1), while also showing the conditions under which mobility can be redirected toward domestic capacity-building (H2).

b. Universities as catalysts for development

Universities concentrate socially accumulated knowledge and constitute key institutional infrastructures for the production of knowledge as a global public good through research, teaching and innovation, which can drive economic and social development when effectively linked to their environment. In the Global South, however, this potential is shaped by academic dependency, where research agendas and evaluation systems are often externally defined, limiting universities' capacity to act as autonomous generators of theory, innovation, and development-oriented research (Núñez Jover & Alcazar Quiñones, 2016). From a Global South public goods perspective, the developmental role of universities depends not only on expansion but also on whether knowledge production is aligned with domestic and regional priorities rather than primarily oriented toward external validation. This requires state-led coordination with universities and productive sectors to ensure that innovation and knowledge production serve domestic and regional development goals rather than reinforcing dependency through external metrics of validation.

The Sábato and Botana (1968) IGE triangle conceptualizes this coordination through three interconnected pillars: the scientific–technical infrastructure (I), government (G), and the productive structure (E). Here, universities function as engines of scientific and technological advancement, while government provides strategic direction and financing from the top apex, and productive structures enable translation into development outcomes. In this article, the triangle is used to specify how internationalization and mobility can generate public-good effects: mobility and partnerships contribute to development when they are institutionally connected to domestic research priorities, stable and clear financing, and innovation pathways—rather than treated mainly as prestige markers.

China illustrates this coordination more clearly; Chinese universities help advance industrial policy and technological upgrading, supporting knowledge production aligned with national priorities and domestic development needs. Altogether, with technocratic leadership since the 1980s (Lin, 2020) positioned science, technology, and higher education as instruments of national modernization, an example of this is the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1995), which explicitly framed “revitalizing the nation through science and education” (Pan & Lo, 2018). Under Hu Jintao, the agenda of “scientific development” and a “harmonious society” further embedded universities within national innovation systems, and Xi Jinping's “Chinese Dream” has linked higher education and research directly to broader geopolitical strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative and, more recently, BRICS.

Returnees and international partnerships have been mobilized to strengthen research capacity and innovation across strategic sectors (Pan & Lo, 2018; Pan, 2011). Since 2012, China has leveraged internationalization as a strategic policy tool, suggesting that mobility can contribute to the public good when governance structures translate international exposure into domestic institutional strengthening (H2). However, China's reliance on Global North benchmarks and validation circuits also highlights that capacity building can coexist with epistemic dependence unless evaluation and agenda setting are actively reoriented.

In Latin America, STI policies often import evaluation standards and problem framings aligned with Eurocentric paradigms, constraining sovereignty and reinforcing academic dependency by introducing agendas and evaluation standards that prioritize publication, metrics, and problem framings defined in the Global North (Paz Enrique et al., 2022). Although STI development in the region has been state-led, investment remains concentrated in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, with a predominant focus on the hard sciences and the marginalization of the humanities and social sciences, which are critical for informing public policy and addressing structural inequalities. Even when states set development goals, weak private-sector engagement and policy instability can undermine the state–industry–academia nexus, producing underfunded research units and limited long-term planning. The comparative lesson is not only “investment” but also the governance architecture that sustains coordination across the triangle: stable policy frameworks, incentives for locally grounded research, and evaluation criteria that reward public value rather than only Global North metrics.

c. Mobility, return, and repatriation

Brain drain remains one of the most persistent challenges linked to internationalization in the Global South. Outward-oriented mobility channels talent toward Global North institutions and can undermine the developmental returns of public investment in education and weaken the capacity of states to link higher education to national growth strategies (Carrington & Detragiache, 1999; Sehar et al., 2021). Originating as a policy concern in the 1960s, the phenomenon has intensified, with skilled migration from developing regions growing by 93% between 1990 and 2000, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Docquier, 2014; Docquier et al., 2007). Student and researcher mobility also reflects entrenched colonial legacies in the global geography of education, where training and epistemic authority remain concentrated in northern institutions (Waters & Brooks, 2021). Internationalization trajectories based primarily on outward mobility often reproduce academic dependency, as knowledge, skills, and research agendas occur in the Global North. This finding reinforces H1: when mobility is structured through Northern circuits of recognition, it tends to reproduce unequal access and unequal validation of knowledge.

China's experience shows how outward mobility can be paired with state-led reintegration to convert brain drain into “brain gain” since the 1980s. Through policy-driven instruments—such as targeted funding for international students (Zha et al., 2019) and incentives for overseas-trained returnees—the state has

enhanced university quality, strengthened research capacity, and expanded global visibility. This “brain development” strategy treats mobility as reciprocal, international exposure enriches competencies, while reintegration channels these into national priorities (Zha et al., 2015). Complementary employability and reintegration mechanisms can also increase the developmental impact of mobility (Xu et al., 2025). In terms of H2, the key point is that return works when it is governed—through stable institutions, career pathways, and research agendas—not when it relies on individual choice alone.

In Latin America, mobility has often followed externally driven agendas, and weak retention and reintegration policies limit universities’ ability to absorb internationally trained researchers and convert mobility into locally relevant knowledge production and innovation. Argentina’s RAICES programme (est. 2003) (Andres & Perrotta, 2024) and Brazil’s recent CNPq repatriation scheme (set in 2024) (Morimoto, 2024) reflect state-led efforts to counter “brain drain” and link return to development. RAICES has supported the return of over 1,000 scientists—mostly trained in the Global North—but outcomes have fluctuated with fiscal retrenchment and ministerial downgrading under Macri (2015–2019) and Milei (from 2023). Brazil combines mandatory return conditions tied to CAPES/CNPq scholarships with reintegration funding yet faces weak retention due to limited stable tenure pathways (de Menezes Neddermeyer, 2002; de Oliveira Andrade, 2018). In both cases, program effectiveness remains vulnerable to shifting political priorities, underinvestment in R&D, and weak engagement from the productive sector, prompting talent outflows when governments undermine scientific activity. Comparatively, China suggests that the decisive factor is not simply return “programmes” but policy continuity and institutional capacity with stable funding, predictable research careers, and alignment between reintegration and national innovation priorities.

d. State leadership and financing in advancing development

As the preceding sections show, political decisions and public policies are decisive in shaping universities as engines of development, particularly through internationalization strategies. State leadership is therefore fundamental for aligning higher education and STI with long-term national development objectives in the Global South, including mobility governance, research financing, and agenda setting. Within the IGE triangle, the state sits at the apex by setting priorities, allocating resources, and coordinating universities, productive sectors, and public institutions around development needs (Sábato & Botana, 1968). Repatriation policies and the mobilization of returnees—exemplified by China’s transformation of brain drain into brain gain—illustrate how state-led action can reintegrate talent into strategic sectors and strengthen domestic capacity (Wang et al., 2024; Zha et al., 2015).

Chinese experience shows how state-led policy frameworks can embed internationalization within a coherent developmental agenda that strengthens institutional quality, expands research and development capacity, and orients knowledge production toward domestic priorities while also enhancing global competitiveness (Marginson, 2018; Wang et al., 2013). However, China also

shows the limits of development through internationalization when recognition remains tied to Global North validation regimes, even strong capacity can reproduce external standards unless evaluation sovereignty and agenda-setting autonomy are actively strengthened.

In contrast, Argentina and Brazil face chronic underfunding and political discontinuity that undermine long-term planning and weaken universities' capacity to translate internationalization into stable domestic capability (Boulton, 1993; Orfila, 2024). However, the cases also suggest complexity, as even under constraint Argentina, more clearly than Brazil, maintains a stronger public-good orientation in access and regional openness, while Brazil's internationalization has often remained more aligned with northern norms of recognition.

Overall, the comparative implication is sharper than "invest more". The cases indicate that mobility contributes to knowledge as a Global South public good only when states and universities build durable governance arrangements like stable financing, reintegration pathways, coherent innovation strategies, and evaluation systems that reward socially relevant research rather than primarily external prestige (H2). Without these, internationalization tends to reproduce unequal access and North-centered validation, concentrating benefits and constraining knowledge as a global public good (H1). This points toward a Global South approach to internationalization that treats mobility as a public policy arena—governing access, terms, and reintegration—so that universities can act as infrastructures for inclusive development and more equitable participation in global knowledge systems.

Policy Implications

This article has argued that framing knowledge and higher education as global public goods is necessary but insufficient to address persistent inequalities in the global knowledge order. Without a Global South public goods perspective, the production, validation, and circulation of knowledge continue to reflect asymmetric power relations that privilege Global North agendas and standards. Drawing on the concept of academic dependency, the analysis shows how these asymmetries are structurally reproduced through internationalization processes, including student mobility, training pathways, research collaboration, and publication systems. Internationalization is therefore best understood as a policy mechanism—not a neutral or inherently progressive process—whose developmental effects depend on how it is governed and embedded in national strategies. The comparative cases of China, Argentina, and Brazil demonstrate that while internationalization can strengthen domestic capacity and innovation, it can also reproduce center-periphery hierarchies when it remains oriented toward North-centered circuits of recognition and funding. This directly addresses the research question by showing how internationalization and student mobility shape knowledge as a global public good by structuring who can access mobility, where training and recognition are concentrated, and whether cross-border engagement produces shared capacity or reinforces dependency.

The study makes three core contributions. First, it connects GPG theory to internationalization by treating student mobility and related circuits (training, collaboration, publication) as governance mechanisms that shape whether knowledge functions as a public good. Second, it advances a Global South public goods perspective that centers academic dependency as a structural problem of validation and agenda setting, not only access. Third, it operationalizes these claims through a comparative reading of China, Argentina, and Brazil using the IGE triangle to clarify how state leadership, universities, and productive sectors mediate whether mobility yields inclusive development or reproduces asymmetry.

When strategically integrated into national innovation systems, universities can function as pivotal engines of inclusive development in the Global South. Across China, Argentina, and Brazil, the analysis underscores four interconnected drivers of impact: (a.) internationalization trajectories that shape the direction of mobility and the location of training and validation; (b.) universities' capacity to act as development catalysts when linked to productive sectors and public priorities; (c.) return migration and repatriation as tools to convert outward mobility into domestic capability; and (d.) sustained public investment and state leadership to coordinate STI, higher education, and mobility within long-term development strategies. China's experience demonstrates how coherent state leadership—anchored in long-term planning, targeted funding, and alignment between universities, productive sectors, and government priorities—can transform higher education into a Global South public good in capacity-building terms, even as its mobility, knowledge production standards and publication circuits continue to interact with Global North standards of recognition. In contrast, Latin American systems, despite strong academic traditions, face fragmentation, fiscal volatility, and political discontinuity that weaken the continuity and scope of their development strategies.

Taken together, the evidence supports both hypotheses. Consistent with H1, when internationalization is governed through Global North standards of excellence, market incentives, and North-centered validation circuits, mobility tends to reproduce unequal access and concentrate epistemic authority—constraining knowledge as a global public good in the Global South. Consistent with H2, when mobility is rooted in sustained state leadership, public investment, and return/reintegration policies, it is more likely to strengthen domestic research capacity, expand inclusion, and contribute to knowledge as a Global South public good.

For Argentina and Brazil, the policy implications are clear. First, governance reforms must secure the insulation of STI and higher education policies from electoral cycles, guaranteeing predictable funding and long-term planning horizons. Second, financing mechanisms should move beyond maintaining existing structures to expanding research capacity, investing in infrastructure, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration that responds to national and regional priorities. Third, mobility policies—especially return migration schemes—must be embedded in broader innovation ecosystems, ensuring that reintegrated talent contributes to productive transformation, technology transfer, and diversification of knowledge production. Fourth, evaluation and incentive systems should be

recalibrated so that policy-relevant research, locally grounded theory-building, and regional collaboration are rewarded. These measures require a governance architecture that links ministries of education, science, and industry and that creates stable channels for collaboration with domestic business sectors. Beyond “more investment”, the comparative lesson is that institutional design, stable funding, coherent coordination across the IGE triangle, and evaluation sovereignty are what convert mobility into durable public-good outcomes.

There are also policy and practice implications for international student affairs beyond the Global South. First, international student policies should be evaluated not only through recruitment, revenue, and rankings but also through public-good criteria, including equity of access (who can move), conditions of participation and wellbeing (who can remain and succeed), and the longer-term distribution of knowledge benefits (who gains capacity). Second, universities can reduce extractive dynamics by building more reciprocal mobility architectures, such as joint supervision and degree pathways, shared research governance with Global South partners, fair credit and authorship practices, and virtual alternatives for inclusive virtual mobility. Finally, institutions can strengthen reintegration and circulation (rather than one-way retention) by supporting return pathways—through alumni research networks, bridge grants, codesigned projects with home institutions, and career services that recognize transnational trajectories. These measures align international student affairs with global public-good objectives rather than reproducing asymmetries through market individual-driven logics.

Finally, the future of universities in the Global South depends on repositioning them not merely as sites for adapting to global knowledge flows but as active shapers of an equitable and multipolar knowledge order *from* and *for* the Global South. Achieving this requires advancing South–South cooperation in research and innovation, protecting the public-good character of higher education, and cultivating policy coherence that transcends short-term political shifts. If anchored in strategic state leadership, inclusive governance, and robust investment, universities can serve as platforms for sovereign and development-oriented knowledge production, social cohesion, and technological advancement—strengthening inclusive development while engaging global circuits without being fully subordinated to their agendas and standards. In this sense, the article’s central implication is both practical and theoretical, since treating internationalization and mobility as a public policy arena—rather than a prestige market—is the key condition for turning higher education into a genuinely shared good.

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✕ Entire work, with extensive editing

The intellectual content of this manuscript—including all ideas, theoretical frameworks, analyses, and conclusions—is entirely the author's own. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely as writing assistance to improve language clarity and readability for a non-native English speaker. AI tools did not contribute to conceptual development, argumentation, or empirical analysis. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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