



Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 7 (2026), pp. 21-46
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/c7b3p465>



From Disruption to Redirection: A Critical Review of the Pandemic's Impact on International Education and South Asian Student Mobility

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ABSTRACT: *The international sector of higher education has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has disrupted student mobility, activities, and academic pursuits worldwide. This paper synthesizes emerging 2020 results to examine changes in preferences among international students and in institutional long-term policies in South Asia. In this case, global student mobility is proposed as an example of a shift in educational preferences, obstacles to e-connectivity, and the need to respond quickly to policy change. This review synthesizes qualitative research studies and policy reports and identifies four major themes: travel restrictions, online learning, mental health, and hiring practices. It also determines the degree of an institution's preparedness, depending on the hybrid learning design and the degree of student support. This study also provides more information about the educational situation in the post-pandemic world and how the world can generate inclusive, equitable, and resilient globalization in the future.*

Keywords: Adaptation, COVID-19, EDI, Hybrid learning, International Student Mobility, Post-pandemic, South Asia

Received: Sept 2, 2025 | **Revised:** Jan 14, 2026 | **Accepted:** Feb 20, 2026

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How to Cite (APA):

Hossain, M. S., Yeasmin, F., & Kabir, D. M. S. (2026). From disruption to redirection: A critical review of the pandemic's impact on international education and south Asian student mobility. *Journal of International Students*, 16(7), 21-46. <https://doi.org/10.32674/c7b3p465>

INTRODUCTION

The world of international learning and student mobility is a space with significant implications, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. New and immediate challenges are being presented to higher education institutions and students. Such a major shift had a significant effect, especially on South Asian students who were affected by the most extended school closures in history (UNOCHA, 2022). In addition, for several decades, the stalemate and regulations imposed have not only suppressed educational and academic enlightenment but also raised questions about the critical analysis of the direction of international mobility, which has shown the most visible perks and opportunities within the global higher education system.

The pandemic has decreased the mobility of international students. Moreover, projections suggest replacing the conventional South-to-North pattern with more complex, multipolar mobility patterns. The emerging development of new educational centers in Asia has also been used to delineate the trend of globalization in the educational structure (Xu, 2023). In such a new and dynamic context, South Asian countries are at the forefront of this change not only because of their own demographic dynamism and young population (and emergent middle class) but also because of existing inequalities (digital divide and economic vulnerability) that have worsened during the pandemic (Rajan, 2024; Ke & Son, 2024). With respect to the region, the number of students migrating from and returning to the area after the pandemic indicates that it has also remained strong and that migration and remittance flows during the post-pandemic years are stabilizing (Rajan, 2024).

Compared with East Asian students, South Asian students differ in several respects. For instance, India continues to experience high outbound flows of students, particularly from younger demographics, driven by the growing demand for world-class education. Nevertheless, China is facing a decline in mobility as its population is decreasing and is paying more attention to higher education (Li

and Zhao, 2024). Such paradoxical tendencies suggest the complex interplay between demographics and policies that shape the future of international student outflow. Simultaneously, the pandemic has exacerbated demand for virtual and blended learning modules, which South Asian students are particularly concerned about due to mobility issues, high costs, and inequality associated with international travel. The need to intensify blended international mobility and the overall digitalization of infrastructures has been highlighted to ensure equal access to global higher education opportunities in the region (Juknyte-Petreikiene et al., 2022).

Since visa restrictions have been eased, online presence has been amplified, and universities have shifted their focus to other markets. Consequently, universities have begun competing more fiercely and are adopting strategic positioning in the post-pandemic international education economy (Li and Zhao, 2024). As such, the crisis has also served as the trigger to reconsider international student flows and the global presence of institutions, where higher education institutions require new policies, emerging technologies, and international alliances to maintain cross-border education (Yang, 2022; Rana & Ekbia, 2022; Strods et al., 2021). This article critically examines these transformations through the lens of South Asian student mobility, situating the region's experiences within broader global trends in enrollment. The research has four aims:

- i. to examine the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mobility in the international context;
- ii. to investigate particular flows of South Asian students, including novel trends in the aftermath of the pandemic;
- iii. to learn how the institution-specific strategies and support structures students have sought to adapt and reroute;
- iv. to take into account the international aspects of such changes to the higher education sector and, in the present example, with a view to equity, diversity, and inclusivity;

In addition to the responses to the above questions, this paper highlights special issues related to institutional global footprints and international enrollment trends. In particular, it is a systemic critique of the nonlinear character of international student mobility, as well as the experiences and accommodations of South Asian students in foreign institutions. Finally, this paper attempts to locate South Asia in the discourses of equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education, addressing the impact of the pandemic on international student enrollment in universities worldwide.

The significance of the study lies in addressing the gap in the South Asian international education arena, since the existing research generally explores the general effects of the pandemic on student mobility around the world, significantly ignoring how issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic design and shape the decisions of South Asian learners. Therefore, this paper contributes to the reconceptualization of push-pull dynamics or crisis moments, indicating determinants such as digital access, financial pressure, and affordability. Similarly, this research proposes an equitable mobility model that integrates resilience and equity expansion.

In the post-COVID-19 period, international higher education entered a phase of strategic reorientation rather than a return to prepandemic norms. Disruptions to global student mobility and enrollment have exposed structural limitations in traditional internationalization models and prompted institutions to reassess recruitment, student support, and long-term planning. Recent research shows that international students are increasingly sensitive to affordability, flexibility, well-being, and institutional responsiveness, indicating a shift toward equity- and resilience-oriented approaches to internationalization (Rickert, 2025). These changes highlight the need for conceptual frameworks that explain how global shocks reshape mobility patterns and institutional responses, particularly in diverse regional contexts.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It is necessary to consider changes in the restructuring of international student mobility in the post-pandemic era using a multidimensional theoretical framework. The structural tendencies of students, universities, and resources have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which has caused short-term changes not only among students but also among universities. Three theories were employed to explain the changes presented: the push–pull theory of international education; the resilience and adaptation model; and the equity, diversity, and inclusion lens. Collectively, these structures contribute to the conceptualization of how structural dislocation has taken center in new possibilities for South Asian students and how institutions are recalculating their transnational strategies in response to these changes.

Push–Pull Theory of International Education

The push–pull model is among the most widely used tools for examining cross-border student flows. The push factors in home countries include insufficient capacity in higher education institutions, economic insecurity, and a desire for upward social mobility. The differences between pull and push factors are that the former emphasizes the qualities of host countries, i.e., their academic status, cost-friendliness, career opportunities after studies, and immigration opportunities (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

The proportions of push and pull factors changed dramatically during the pandemic. In South Asia, long-term school shutdowns, a fluctuating domestic labor market, and inadequate digital infrastructure contributed to the growing interest in studying abroad. Amidst this, the attraction of time-honored destinations such as the United States and the United Kingdom weakened because of border restrictions and delayed visas. In comparison, the attractiveness of destinations such as Canada, Australia, and Germany has been enhanced by their open policies, increased online recruitment efforts, and favorable poststudy prospects. This restructuring underscores the importance of reevaluating the concept of push–pull factors as fixed factors and considering them as highly dynamic forces that are shaped by global crises.

Resilience and Adaptation Frameworks

Push and pull forces are used to explain drives and structural change, but they are not the most effective ways to describe the adaptive nature of students and institutions in the face of disruption. The theory of resilience relates to how a system withstands, adapts to, and recovers from a shock (Folke, 2016). For students, resilience refers to their openness to adopting hybrid education, deferring mobility in the short term, or exploring alternative destinations. Institutions also demonstrated adaptability in terms of restructuring recruitment strategies, enlisting virtual admissions fairs, and increasing online support services for students.

Resilience was also outstanding among those students who remained focused on obtaining international opportunities despite digital inequalities, financial predicaments, and bureaucratic obstacles in South Asia. The challenges facing institutions, in terms of adaptation, included diversifying partnerships, investing in digital channels, and accessing new student marketplaces. By doing so, the resilience lens contributes to understanding why internationalization did not fail but rather reformed itself in accordance with new and divergent patterns of participation.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Lens

Structural inequalities have also been exacerbated by the pandemic, which underscores the importance of the EDI lens in understanding post-pandemic mobility. South Asian students were denied access to resources and were digitally excluded and unsupported. EDI systems highlight that these systemic barriers can be effectively addressed through the higher educational system, which must adopt inclusive practices, provide equal access to resources, and offer supportive student services, particularly with respect to cultural diversity (Marginson, 2022).

The new services offered by institutions, such as digital literacy and mental health counseling, as well as student scholarships, have been enhanced to better serve low-income and first-generation students; however, these services still have gaps. The EDI perspective will be critical for understanding the challenges faced by South Asian students and for advancing the ethical process of internationalization, which will be implemented more openly and equitably.

Integrating Critical Internationalization and Intersectionality

When equity, diversity, and inclusion is interwoven with critical theories, its analytical strength provides a more solid grounding for policy frameworks. Critical internationalization studies (Stein, 2017) reveal how global inequality is often reproduced through international education systems, highlighting virtual recruitment and institutional offerings during the COVID-19 pandemic, which often privilege advanced learners. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) highlights how unequal access to digital infrastructure and mobility is further shaped by the overlapping identities of class, gender, first-generation status, etc. These theoretical notions complement Push–Pull and Resilience models by

mirroring how post-pandemic mobility has expanded opportunities for international students and, at the same time, deepened exclusion.

Integrative Conceptual Model

With these views combined, the present paper will construct a conceptual model to describe the process of mobility in the pandemic era: Shock (pandemic), Discontent (digital recruitment, support, partnerships), Change in student patterns, (new places, hybrid modes, new desires), and Like scenarios (multilocation of global centers, inclusive, resilient internationalization). The push-pull theory in this framework explains the dynamic priorities and destination choices, whereas the resilience models represent the responsive actions of learners and educational entities. The EDI method, however, is an indication of the moral obligation to ensure equitable access and inclusive guidance. Collectively, these frameworks provide a comprehensive rationale for critically examining South Asian patterns of mobility and institutional responses and situating them within the context of the reconfiguration of global higher education in the postpandemic era.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a critical narrative review study design to summarize recent evidence on how the pandemic has affected international education, with a particular focus on student mobility from South Asia. This methodology was selected because it provides the opportunity to combine various sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and theoretical models, rather than simply providing a systematic review, given the dynamic scope of the topic of international mobility in the postpandemic period.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Using Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, UNESCO report, and the Institute of International Education (IIE) report, searches were performed between June and July 2025. International education, student mobility, COVID-19, pandemic disruption, and South Asia (including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) were used as combined key terms. Boolean operators were used, and screens were created to list the keywords that would capture other sources.

Inclusion criteria

- Publications from 2020 to 2025 addressing the effects of COVID-19 on higher education mobility;
- Studies with a qualitative, policy-driven, or mixed-method focus;
- Works emphasizing South Asian students or comparative analyses, including South Asia;

Exclusion criteria

- Research outside the scope of international mobility;
- Studies predating 2020, unless a baseline context is provided;

- Commentaries without empirical or policy grounding;

Selection process

The search initially identified 524 records. After removing duplicates ($n = 113$) and screening titles/abstracts, 274 studies were excluded. A further 86 articles were excluded during the full-text review because of insufficient relevance. A total of 51 studies and policy reports met the inclusion criteria and were included in the analysis.

A PRISMA-style flow diagram (Figure 1) illustrates this selection process, showing the identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion steps.

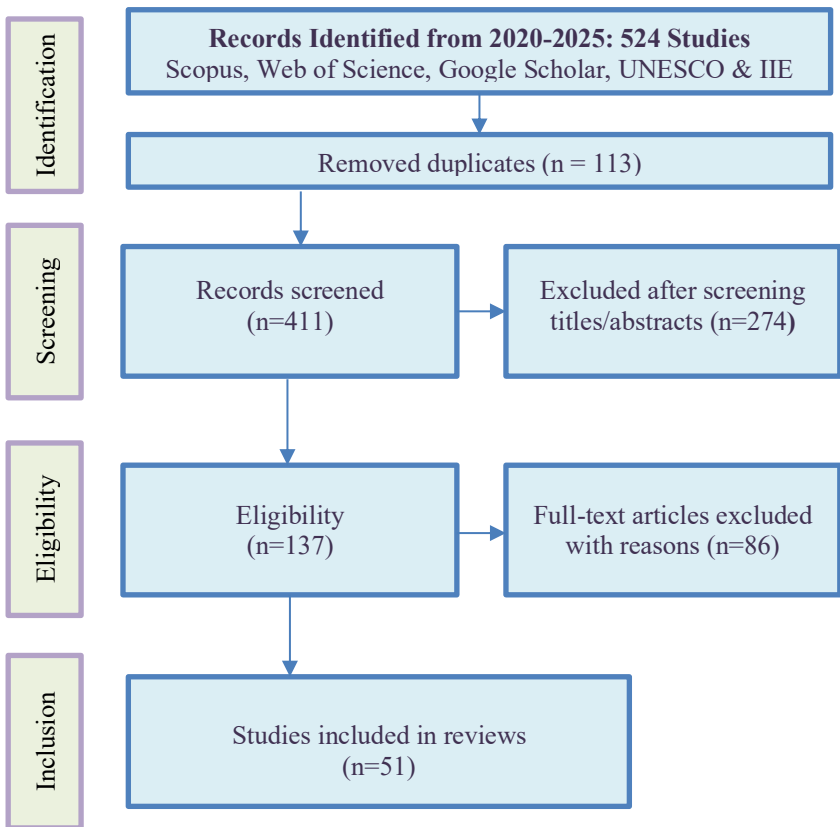


Figure 1. PRISMA-style flow diagram

The narrative review followed PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparent methodological rigor. Initially, the database search produced 524 records. After a minute title-abstract screening and objective assessment, 51 works met the

inclusion criteria. This PRISMA flow summary is shown in Figure 1. The researchers adopted a thematic synthesis approach to analyze the selected literature, and they inductively and deductively performed open coding, aligning with the conceptual framework. Coding disagreements were resolved through a trial of discussion and consensus. To ensure interpretive transparency, each source was classified by type. To make the study more systematic, the themes were refined through iterative clustering.

Rationale for the Approach

This methodology enabled a comprehensive yet focused synthesis, drawing on both global datasets (IIE, UNESCO) and regional policy responses. By embedding analysis within established theoretical frameworks (push–pull, resilience, and EDI), the review not only documents disruption but also interprets how it redirected student mobility and institutional strategies.

FINDINGS

The findings from the reviewed literature demonstrate that digital inequality is not a temporary byproduct of pandemic-related concerns; rather, it expands to create a structured condition, redefining mobility opportunities for South Asian learners. Different driving factors, such as limited access to technology, a variety of digital literacy, and limited devices, restrict participation in online learning platforms and virtual recruitment. This limitation redirects push-pull factors by moving students toward more affordable countries or delaying mobility. From a critical internationalization perspective, this digital divide perpetuates international education hierarchies, increasing infrastructural barriers. Intersectionality theory also explains how rural, low-resource country learners face such inequalities. These constraints point to the hidden issue underneath, portraying how hybrid mobility can also fortify hierarchy, inequality, and barriers. Addressing this stratification is crucial to understanding postpandemic pathways.

Pandemic Disruptions in Global Mobility

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented disruption in international mobility, and one of the most conspicuous aspects is higher education. International education is highly dependent on cross-border mobility; however, pandemic-related travel restrictions, the inability to receive visas on time, and other abrupt changes prevent millions of students from reaching their host country (Strods et al., 2021; Piccoli et al., 2021). The international aviation sector was severely impacted in 2020, with air traffic decreasing by more than 70%. The impact of this shrinkage on international student flows highlights the fact that student mobility is part of a broader mobility system (Achiume et al., 2020). This concept is referred to as the Immobility Turn by scholars, who focus on enforced immobility rather than mobility as a freedom that is being questioned (Martin & Bergmann, 2021). Tourism and labor migration were also disrupted, but both higher education and international enrollments faced a specific crisis, as international enrollments were considered not only an academic resource but also

a pillar of the economy. Universities that had long been competing in the global student marketplace were seeing their pipelines crumble. UNESCO and IIE statistics report that there were steep declines in international releases and enrollments from 2020–2021 (Strods et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2023). New international enrollments in the United States declined by 43 percent in Fall 2020, marking the most severe decline ever recorded and underscoring the vulnerability of mobility to open borders and immigration policies (Mason et al., 2023). Although partial base recovery began in 2022, the episode revealed that the system was still weak.

Universities reacted by swiftly adapting to the situation with the assistance of digital technology. Online enrollment, online orientation, hybrid enrollment, and online academic support were implemented to maintain continuity (Nagy, 2022). Although these solutions were able to recreate the immersive cultural and social aspects of international study, they could not reflect them. In addition to necessitating virtualization, student-reported barriers included difficulties with time-zone coordination, inaccessible internet, and limited integration possibilities (Nagy, 2022).

On the policy side, the Citizenship, Migration and Mobility in a Pandemic (CMMP) dataset is used to monitor the changing restrictions and exemptions among countries (Piccoli et al., 2021). The figures show that there was unequal implementation of restrictions: some territories closed stoppages nearly completely, while others allowed a small number of students to quarantine. These inconsistencies confused students and institutions, as they hindered planning and decision-making processes (Piccoli et al., 2021).

Even during disruptions, the pandemic triggered the reconsideration of mobility models. Observers note that the crisis accelerated digitalization and the generalization of hybrid mobility, where remote learning and temporarily constrained mobility were integrated (Mello & Brewster, 2023). Virtual exchanges, blended programs, and transnational partnerships were among the experiments that higher education began to embrace. Such models also help mitigate the risks of border closures and increase inclusivity toward students in resource-constrained areas, especially in South Asia, where numerous forms of financial and structural barriers can hinder movement (Nagy, 2022).

In total, the pandemic has highlighted both the shortcomings and the possibility of global student mobility. The deterioration of airline traffic and the restriction of immigration made it clear that free movement was among the most critical factors in higher education (Achiume et al., 2020). However, there is an institutional change process, restructuring of policy, and computerization that result in more diversified systems that are more robust. A balance between re-embodied physical mobility and hybrid solutions, which are equally resilient to disruption and accommodating varying student needs, will become the way forward (Martin & Bergmann, 2021).

South Asian Student Mobility

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, South Asia, in particular, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, were among the most prolific nations in terms of their ability to export students. The outbound students had to obtain international education regarding socioeconomic development, the number of employment opportunities on campus, and access to a globalized competitive environment (Glukhov & Ivanova, 2024; Kulkarni, 2020). India was the second-largest source of senders globally, and Bangladesh and Pakistan also experienced strong flows, indicating the impact of demographic and domestic capacity shortages on postsecondary education.

The pandemic disrupted these trajectories. One of the most divisive questions was the digital divide, which disadvantaged South Asian learners in terms of proportion. The online transition to instruction was hindered by a weak ability to access broadband connectivity, a lack of devices, and unreliable technological infrastructures (Bauschke-Urban & Dedgjoni, 2025; Thobani & Butt, 2022). Such inequalities are also entrenched in structural inequalities, which were compounded by the economic recession that reduced incomes and fuelled fears about tuition prices (Judge & Walton, 2024). Financial and technological limitations have multiplied, reducing the options for global opportunities available to most students.

Governments have attempted to respond by devising policy innovations. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India placed added emphasis on interdisciplinarity and internationalization, aiming to increase the country's capacity and reduce excessive outbound traffic (Li & Zhao, 2024). Pakistan also used to extend its scholarships and financing to promote movement despite economic pressure (Glukhov & Ivanova, 2024). These actions positively impact the challenges associated with the crisis; however, their long-term sustainability is still in question.

During the recovery of global mobility, South Asian students shifted their focus to more affordable and accessible destinations. Canada became a preferred destination because of its open immigration policies, the right to work after completing the course, and the increasing number of Indian students enrolled there (Judge & Walton, 2024). Australia and Germany attract more people by providing them with increased employment opportunities as well as open messages (Li & Zhao, 2024; Bauschke-Urban & Dedgjoni, 2025). Gulf countries have not lost their significance because of geographic proximity, low costs, and labor linkages; thus, they play the role of both temporary and long-term hubs (Glukhov & Ivanova, 2024).

The data of comparisons within the borders of the East Asian region show unequal proceedings. Formerly the largest in the world, China has been facing decelerating outbound flows because of population shrinkage and the growth of stronger domestic higher education (Li & Zhao, 2024). In contrast, India has a large youth base and an emerging middle-income population. Nevertheless, its tertiary education capacity is limited, which restricts its ability to respond to shocks, as seen during the pandemic. This discrepancy highlights the impact of

the demographic and policy environment on international education: China has become a significant recipient, while South Asia has become a substantial source of students.

These transformations demonstrate the strength and flexibility of South Asian students. The students have made new decisions and shifted their priorities to mixed modes, despite financial hardships and digital inequalities. The host countries have been strategizing to win in this demand, resulting in a more diversified world of education. Researchers note that the global higher education system is becoming multipolar, with centers outside the United States and the United Kingdom becoming increasingly critical (Huang et al., 2023; Rajan, 2024).

Overall, the pandemic has highlighted weaknesses and accelerated the transformation of mobility in South Asia. Structural problems such as digital differences, budget constraints, and rigid domestic frameworks have been faced with perseverance by having an alternative place and means of study. Regional experience highlights vulnerability and flexibility, providing insights into how international mobility systems may be restructured to become more inclusive, affordable, and stable during times of crisis in the future (Rajan, 2024; Huang et al., 2023).

Changing Student Preferences

Studies have also shown that the pandemic continues to influence international students' college choices and enrollment decisions, redefining destination preferences amid ongoing public health uncertainty (Xue et al., 2024). This pandemic has changed international students' preferences, altering their destination choices, affordability, learning patterns, and well-being concerns on a broader scale. Hybrid and online learning have been at the center of these changes, reshaping international student life (Fabian et al., 2024; Bright & Vogler, 2024; Yeli et al., 2023). Hybrid models offer a flexible learning approach that combines online learning with face-to-face interaction, striking a balance between academic, personal, and professional life. Nevertheless, problems such as reduced spontaneous collaboration and difficulties with course delivery persist (Baig, 2023). Despite these tensions, hybrid formats will most likely remain part of higher education worldwide.

Students have increasingly adopted career-based reasons for their preferred learning modalities. On-site and online possibilities can facilitate the maintenance of employment or practical skills, in addition to studying, thereby increasing access to overseas employment markets (Baig, 2023; Zeng & Bridges, 2023; Feubli et al., 2023). Evidence further indicates that career development expectations among international students were significantly disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, reshaping mobility planning, post-study aspirations, and future pathways (Li et al., 2024). This flexibility is especially relevant to South Asian students, whose historical orientation toward higher education abroad has been shaped by the greater opportunities for upward mobility and employment in the global economy.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of health, safety, and mental well-being even more. A significant way in which the pandemic has benefited students is the ability to stay in safe conditions, usually at home, and continue their studies (Zeng & Bridges, 2023; Osaili et al., 2023). The hybrid systems alleviated the stress related to international travel during the crisis, but time spent in isolated virtual environments also became a source of mental health issues. This means that institutions should adopt a strategy of integrating mental health and well-being services into any hybrid and online course.

Although the domain of digital modalities has expanded, face-to-face instruction still plays a significant role. Face-to-face learning encourages group work, engagement, and social belonging, which remain key features of the international experience for many students (Nikolopoulou, 2022). The dilemma facing institutions is how to strike a balance between the affordances of hybrid learning and the long-term benefits of physical interaction.

Hybrid learning can support individual learning styles. VARK research indicates that students can perform better when their visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic preferences are considered pedagogical strategies (Fikri & Nuradina, 2023). Such multimodal choices provide additional scaffolding to enable international learners to cross linguistic and cultural barriers.

Affordability has become a key factor in determining value. With hybrid forms, costs are reduced to relocate and reside elsewhere, thereby providing students from middle-income or resource-deprived backgrounds with opportunities (Bright & Vogler, 2024; Mahande, 2023). Notably, affordability also requires the presence of digital infrastructure and institutional backing. Hybrid systems may also exacerbate disparities unless specific interventions are implemented to address them, particularly among students in the South Asian region, where digital inequality has been particularly pronounced (Thobani & Butt, 2022). This, in turn, calls for governments and institutions to increase scholarship funding, finance technology, and strengthen broadband capacity to ensure that the hybrid learning process is equitable.

East Asian learners, especially Chinese students, are face-to-face learners, as they have a well-established domestic provision. Western students view hybrid education as added value. In the case of South Asian students, however, hybrid education offers a relatively inexpensive opportunity and a lifeline between financial constraints and global aspirations (Judge & Walton, 2024).

In brief, the pandemic triggered a shift in students' preferences toward a multidimensional range of standards that could not be reduced to academic reputation. The needs of international students are becoming more flexible, affordable, and focused on mental and physical health, as well as safety. South Asian cohorts face both exceptional potential and peril in hybrid learning, highlighting structural inequalities. Institutions that integrate flexible and student-centered practices and narrow access gaps are most likely to be competitive in recruiting a diverse range of students in the post-pandemic era.

Institutional Strategies and Adaptations

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the international student movement, compelling institutions of higher learning to plan their recruitment, support, and global communication, among other activities, with an equity-based approach. This transformation shifted beyond the temporary adjustments made during the crisis to a more permanent transformation of institutions, and the areas of focus turned to AI, digital platforms, and equity frameworks.

One of the most obvious areas of change is recruitment. As travel restrictions were imposed and applicant numbers dwindled, universities increasingly turned to AI-based tools, such as chatbots, predictive analytics, and natural language processing, to maintain global connectivity. For example, the Politecnico di Torino has utilized an AI chat tool that handles approximately 20,000 requests from applicants from more than 100 countries, demonstrating how automation can enhance institutional reach and maximize applicant satisfaction (Karimi et al., 2024). Natural language processing and predictive analytics are being utilized to improve recruitment pipelines, refine target communications, and mitigate biases that can skew the decision-making and admissions process (Amruta & Raman, 2024a, 2024b). In the meantime, virtual recruitment fairs and webinars are available, as they circumvent geographical and economic barriers, allowing students in other parts of the world, such as South Asia, a rare chance to study a range of institutions simultaneously.

This was also crucial in the adaptation of student support systems. The pandemic has exacerbated monetary, technological, and psychological issues, particularly among international students, in the face of an endeavor to simplify cultural acclimatization and a sense of loneliness. These pressures also extended beyond academics into the financial, psychological, and social domains, reinforcing the importance of institutional support strategies that buffer multilayered disruption (Almadadha et al., 2025). AI-powered platforms are equipped with features such as digital literacy credits, psychological advice services, and financial tips. They also offer real-time human assistance at a personal scale (Karyotaki et al., 2024). It has also facilitated more transparency and equity in that the use of automatic scholarship and financial planning software allows low-income students to make more informed decisions about how they apply to scholarship and other aid programs. Such data-driven customization is the beginning of a new phase in the recruitment sphere as the priorities change to long-term student retention and well-being.

Digital technology has also transformed the factors of interaction at universities. Some of these institutions have become more virtual as a result of limited mobility, incorporating online classrooms and online collaboration tools or utilizing AI-assisted translation services to facilitate cross-border communication (Bansal et al., 2024). Student exchanges and dual degree programs, which were once viewed as temporary alternatives to physical mobility, are now regarded as supplements to physical mobility. The online simulations not only reduce travel costs and environmental pollution but also provide

international education to students who would otherwise be unable to afford to travel to other countries.

A crucial dimension of these approaches is the level of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Although AI tools are more efficient and personalized, they can also exacerbate inequalities when they are designed without considering the potential for algorithmic bias. Researchers suggest that ethical supervision and prevention are needed when technology is used (Abdelhalim et al., 2024; Program, 2024). In fact, institutions are incorporating EDI systems into their overall strategies by modifying curricula, offering staff training opportunities in multicultural pedagogy, and implementing targeted interventions for underrepresented groups. The ACCE DTP program is one such example, illustrating how equity can be incorporated into the doctoral recruitment process to increase diversity (McLaughlin, 2023). Accordingly, the policy-making mechanisms that facilitate equity in academic settings are increasingly taking center stage in the planning of institutions (Chai, 2025; Thomson & Gooberman-Hill, 2024).

Collectively, these approaches are indicative of a larger change in the postpandemic world of higher education. AI and virtual worlds are entering the recruitment process; student services are becoming more personal and digital-based; hybrid and virtual mobility is being enabled with extended capabilities internationally; and inclusion concepts are being applied to EDIs, all of which are driven by a focus on equity. The general perception throughout these various adaptations is that institutional design should be resilient and inclusive. Future generations struggle to find a balance between technological efficiency and human control, ensuring that innovation facilitates equity and accessibility rather than undermining human rights in international higher education.

Table 1

Key Findings on Pandemic Disruption and South Asian Student Mobility

Theme	Key Findings from Literature	South Asian Focus	Pathways of Redirection
Pandemic Disruptions in Global Mobility	Mobility has been restricted at least 70 times due to travel bans, an uncertain visa regime, and airline closures (Achieme et al., 2020; Strods et al., 2021; Piccoli et al., 2021). Online onboarding was used in universities (Nagy, 2022).	South Asian students faced compounded immobility due to weak digital infrastructure and bureaucratic hurdles.	Marked the “Immobility Turn” (Martin & Bergmann, 2021), forcing institutions to design resilient mobility pipelines and diversify access pathways.
South Asian	Before the pandemic, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan dominated	India: NEP 2020 aimed to retain talent	Outbound flows redirected

Mobility Patterns	outbound student flows (Glukhov & Ivanova, 2024; Kulkarni, 2020). The pandemic caused financial stress and deepened digital divides (Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024; Thobani & Butt, 2022).	domestically (Li & Zhao, 2024). Pakistan: expanded scholarships (Glukhov & Ivanova, 2024).	toward Canada, Australia, Germany, and Gulf hubs, reflecting policy openings and shifting affordability (Bauschke-Urban & Dedgjoni, 2025; Huang et al., 2023).
Changing Student Preferences	Flexibility, affordability, and safety were the primary reasons why hybrid learning gained popularity (Fabian et al., 2024; Bright & Vogler, 2024; Zeng & Bridges, 2023). Face-to-face interaction remains important (Nikolopoulou, 2022).	South Asian students emphasized affordability, digital access, and career mobility (Baig, 2023; Feubli et al., 2023).	Preferences are shifting toward hybrid models, safer destinations, and career-oriented disciplines, necessitating institutional flexibility.
Institutional Strategies & Adaptations	AI chatbots and virtual fairs enhanced recruitment reach (Karimi et al., 2024). Support systems expanded to digital literacy, mental health, and financial aid (Karyotaki et al., 2024). Virtual exchanges and dual degrees broadened global footprints (Bansal et al., 2024).	EDI challenges: Reducing Bias in AI Systems (Abdelhalim et al., 2024). Targeted outreach is essential for underrepresented groups (McLaughlin, 2023).	Redirection through digital partnerships, inclusive recruitment, and embedding EDI safeguards to ensure equity in global higher education.

DISCUSSION

The overlap of learning outcomes, charted in the context of disrupted global mobility, trend-setting in the South Asian region, changing preferences, and institutional adaptations, demonstrates that the pandemic has become a game changer in international higher education. This discussion examines how disruption has influenced international student mobility and institutional strategies through the lens of the push-pull framework, the perspectives of

resilience and adaptation, and an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) framework. It also incorporates these insights into the aims of the Special Issue on Institutional Global Footprints and International Enrollment Trends in the Post-Pandemic AI Era, which focuses on global competitiveness, enrollment recovery, and equity.

Shifts in Push–Pull Dynamics

Traditional theories of international student migration are founded on the push mechanism, such as the absence of opportunities at home, financial aspirations, and political turmoil, as well as pull-based rationalities, including quality education, poststudy job opportunities, and cultural attractiveness. This calculus changed essentially because of the pandemic. The uncertainty created by travel bans, the inability to feel confident about the legitimacy of visas, and border closures weakened pull factors in traditionally robust destinations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Strods et al., 2021; Piccoli et al., 2021). In the meantime, new pull factors, such as those in Canada, Australia, and Germany, with friendlier immigration laws and direct control over the pandemic, emerged as destinations of choice among South Asian students (Judge & Walton, 2024; Bauschke-Urban & Dedgioni, 2025). This nearness and cost-effectiveness led the Gulf countries to maintain their position, introducing the regional element of movement.

On the push side, structural inequalities in South Asia came to the fore during the pandemic. The digital divide limited students' educational opportunities, as they were unable to access online education (Thobani & Butt, 2022). Additionally, financial pressure reduces students' ability to meet school fees and living costs while overseas (Judge & Walton, 2024). Consequently, affordability and digital access were rated as key factors that prompted students to pursue hybrid and regional opportunities. The push–pull model thus depicts not only change but also a rechanneling of streams to locations that are regarded as safer, less costly, and technologically flexible.

Resilience and Adaptation in Institutional and Student Responses

The resilience framework helps explain how students and institutions have dealt with pandemic shocks. At the student level, resiliency was characterized by the capacity to adapt to hybrid learning models financially, academically, and personally. The hybrid learning approach provided flexibility and protection with minimal disruption to academic life (Fabian et al., 2024; Bright & Vogler, 2024). Stripping physical mobility, students recontextualized mobility as not only a physical movement but also as a reference to belonging in transnational communities of learning through virtual and hybrid spaces. More specifically, it was South Asian students' interest in bridging the gap between the affordability and accessibility of local and international credentials.

Institutions have been resilient, easily adapting to the use of digital and artificial intelligence in hiring and student services. Virtual fairs and predictive

analytics have enabled universities to remain connected to the world, even when mobility is restricted, through the presence of chatbots (Karimi et al., 2024; Amruta & Raman, 2024a). Similarly, the institution's involvement in supporting students through counseling, digital literacy, and financial aid suggests that it is already taking steps to safeguard the well-being of learners amidst this uncertainty (Karyotaki et al., 2024). These plans focus not only on recovery resilience but also on resiliency as a source of change, as institutions rebrand into new forms of global connectivity and assistance that have a high likelihood of long-term survival.

With respect to resilience, the pandemic was a resilience test that revealed weak points and limited adaptation capacity. As institutions further developed their digital systems and global networks, they responded more quickly, and those with the technological and financial resources to handle the disruptions successfully navigated them. Conversely, disparities in resilience underscore the need for systemic preparedness in addressing future crises.

DEI in the Post-Pandemic Landscape

An EDI lens reveals the disproportionate effects of the pandemic and the risk of ostracism in the reform of mobility. Other concerns that were characteristic of international students during the pandemic were the lack of structural support (discrimination and unequal access to facilities and resources) and the difficulty of cultural adjustment (Xiong et al., 2024; Tavares, 2024). The digital inequalities and financial conditions in South Asia exacerbated these factors, predisposing South Asian students to a higher risk of being left out.

The coverage of the EDI by institutional strategies varied. It was discovered that the use of AI in offering recruitment and support functions was effective, but such a practice could instill biases unless it was used wisely (Abdelhalim et al., 2024). Bringing infrastructure together, programs, including specific outreach to underrepresented individuals in doctoral education (McLaughlin, 2023) and workforce preparation education in a multicultural setting (Chai, 2025), highlight attempts to incorporate the theme of inclusion into institutional processes. However, EDI cannot focus solely on reactive change; it must be structurally devoted in a way that ensures that digital transformation and internationalization are not only in the interest of all students but also reasonably so. Specifically, funding, culturally competent counseling, and anti-discrimination systems continue to be fundamental to the creation of a positive academic setting that favors South Asian and other minority students.

Contributions to the Special Issue Goals

The results of this research and discussion can be directly related to the special issue topics of institutional international footprints, trends of international enrollment in higher education, and equity in the postpandemic AI world. In addition, institutional international activity has shifted from physical to virtual partnerships, networking, and joint degree programs. The connotations of these approaches indicate an internationalized project in which AI and technology are

the driving forces. Second, enrollment patterns are recovering and reorienting in the international space. The number of students is becoming stable on the global stage; however, the trends are heading in a direction that opens possibilities for value delivery, safety, and flexible policies. South Asian students are well placed to emulate Australia and Canada. Third, equity is both an opportunity and a challenge. Even digital innovation may exacerbate the gap between people unless active efforts are made to foster an inclusive mindset. On the other hand, the inclusion of EDI structures implies that internationalization also promotes resilience and equity.

This discussion provides an analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the redirection of international education. Push–pull dynamics are signals of shifts in motivation and preferences at destinations. Resilience theory describes the adaptive processes of both students and institutions, and EDI emphasizes the ethical and equality issues surrounding them. Together, they offer a unique perspective on the post-pandemic world, where international education will undergo reconstruction.

Synthesis

The pandemic offered the international student movement an opportunity to radicalize. Simultaneously, South Asia, in the broader sense, was marked by both structural and new opportunities and inequalities. Students are no longer spectators of global processes; they are participants, working together to create a low-cost, sustainable, and inclusive world. In addition, the institutions are not merely recovering lost enrollments; they are also reorganizing their plans globally with the assistance of technology and EDI. You will see that there is no disintegration of the disturbance, as you will see by this discussion. Instead, it has been integrated into a rebranding of international education, encompassing more diverse, digitalized, and inclusive conceptions of what international education can be. The results below provide insight into the long-term consequences and policy suggestions that will be instrumental in achieving the sustainability of global student mobility. It is expected to continue increasing in the years to come.

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Resettlement, vulnerability, and institutional adjustment significantly affected the mobility of international students, particularly in South Asia, following the pandemic. The implications and recommendations summarize how the disruption has shifted mobility and outline actions actors can take to create more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient systems.

Redirection Toward Regional and Multipolar Hubs

The change in the post-pandemic period is the diversification of destinations. As a result of this development pattern, students from South Asia have moved to countries such as Canada, Australia, Germany, and the Gulf states, as these countries are perceived to have immigration-friendly policies, low costs, and easy admission procedures (Huang et al., 2023; Li & Zhao, 2024). Singapore and Dubai are also emerging as significant education centers in the region. Such a

diversion involves a multipolar pattern of student flows, which implies that institutions need to establish partnerships with nontraditional Western destinations.

Risks in the Post-Pandemic Mobility Landscape

The need to utilize digital platforms that arose during the pandemic is likely to continue creating disproportions. In South Asia, less affluent learners continue to lack access to broadband and equipment, which hinders their ability to engage in hybrid learning (Thobani & Butt, 2022). Economic pressure is growing, as is the likelihood of marginalization, particularly for nonmarginalized groups (Judge & Walton, 2024). Moreover, there is the issue of higher outbound movement, which is a concern regarding brain drain, as local systems lack opportunities to secure investment in capacity-building.

Opportunities for hybrid mobility and digital partnerships

These blended and hybrid forms have emerged as the new norm in the pandemic and have allowed the institute to be more accessible and affordable. Virtual exchanges and dual degrees may be run without the need for complete relocation to another country. These partnerships are also beneficial for encouraging high-achieving and low-income South Asian students to gain international exposure. These models must be institutionalized, not as a response to current conditions in the short term but as a long-term process of building the university into a global presence.

Policy Recommendations for Institutions

- ***Flexibility of mobility systems:*** Invest in e-recruitment and e-interviewing systems, expand the reach of partners, and develop contingency plans in case of another crisis.
- ***Student services:*** Reinforce supportive student services, including counseling, mental health services, and financial assistance, which are specifically tailored to meet the needs of international students.
- ***Ethical use of AI:*** The moral application of AI, including transparency and a checks-and-balances mindset, helps reduce bias in chatbot-based hiring and forecasting analytics.
- ***South–South alliances:*** Cultivate a regional trend and sever reliance on Western destinations by establishing partnerships with Asia and the Global South.

Policy recommendations for governments

- ***Digital equity initiatives:*** Digital equity initiatives must increase broadband access, allocate devices, and develop digital literacy skills to help bridge the divide in access.

- **Targeted scholarships:** Assist in funding initiatives that support vulnerable groups in breaking the poverty trap of inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic.
- **Regulatory frameworks:** Allow the release of virtual and mixed certificates to create a formal seal to atypical movement routes.
- **Bilateral agreements:** Bargain on the spot to allow visa issuance, work permits, and protection of students to push the confidence of mobility pipelines.

The mobility of South Asians is expected to be high and more diverse since it is low-cost, online, and risk-free. Governments and institutions need to collaborate to develop resilient systems that strike a balance between innovation and equity. International education can be made more inclusive, sustainable, and globally connected through new hybrid routes/paths, the expansion of EDI-based services, and regional cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mobility of South Asian university students in the global context, which has reshaped the landscape of globalized education. It attempts to answer four key questions: (1) How has the crisis affected the flow of international learners? (2) What are the policies that have endangered or supported the experience of these students? (3) Which are the new trends in the choice of destination, study, and preferences? (4) How do these aspects define equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice? A literature review and an analysis of guidelines and models answer these essential issues. The findings showcase how disruption has led international learning onto a new path, highlighting the push-and-pull factors that have changed student mobility due to the pandemic. Economic incentives, visa insecurity, and travel restrictions further weaken ties to the West. South Asian learners, who constitute a large share of the affected population and are among the largest cross-border student populations, have been resilient in the face of the digital divide and economic hardship. New norms are hybrid and online learning, where universities have to use artificial intelligence to recruit and host online fairs (among other support systems to keep students connected). These shifting trends are used to offset short-term churn and redistribute international student flows more sustainably.

COVID-19 caused discontinuity and alteration. It shifted the flow and institutional response, highlighting the importance of bringing equity to birth. In tandem with these changes, there remains an opportunity to create a more multipolar, robust, and inclusive international education system. This kind of reconfiguration requires not only policy innovation and additional investigation but also the development of something more than a restoration of the prepandemic normal, a new form of equitable and sustainable internationalization of higher education.

South Asia leads the way with its youthful population and developing economies, pioneering tomorrow's workforce while promoting regional

integration. Hybrid mobility models, South–South relationships, and digital inclusion initiatives can simultaneously offer a brighter future through lasting pipelines if carefully implemented and fully committed to, with moral vetting, and realized. With institutional progress amid globalization and evolving enrollment activities, policymakers and educators should champion student-focused, access-augmenting, and trust-building initiatives.

This review process has turned out to be complex. The limitations of the study lie in the reliance on secondary sources of data. However, despite the projected increase in international student enrollment, the underlying differences require attention. Once equity, diversity, and inclusion are institutionalized, the difference between the privileged and the underprivileged becomes wider. This paper suggests that to ensure that global education is more sustainable and fair, institutional inclusion, the protection of vulnerable populations, and the integration of vulnerable groups within institutional plans and strategies are crucial factors.

Acknowledgment

While preparing this manuscript, we used artificial intelligence (AI) tools in a limited way for some sections, with extensive editing. AI tools were only used to check and correct grammar and language issues in a few parts of the paper. Their role was minimal, and all content was carefully reviewed, corrected, and approved by the authors to ensure that it met academic standards.

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