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Exploring post-graduation mobility: A scoping review of international students' decision-making

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ABSTRACT: *International student mobility has been an important feature of higher education and has attracted substantial research attention in recent decades; however, students' post-graduation mobility remains largely overlooked in the current literature. Guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework (JBI) and the guidelines by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), this scoping review synthesised data from 65 studies pertaining to factors contributing to international students' post-graduation migration decisions. Descriptive mapping and thematic analyses revealed five main dimensions of influence: personal, career and employment, societal and cultural, connection, policy and political factors. The review suggests that students' decisions are highly contextualised and situational and go beyond economic considerations of returns on investment. Additionally, the analysis revealed that students' decisions are consistently evolving, showing fluidity, uncertainty and temporality. This review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of international student mobility and highlights the importance of reframing the theoretical approaches in future research to better reflect the dynamics of these pathways.*

Keywords: decision-making, higher education, international students, international student mobility, post-graduation mobility

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility (ISM) has become an important feature of higher education (HE), with approximately 4.6 million students studying in overseas higher education institutions (HEIs) globally in 2022 (OECD, 2025). This growth is driven by a growing middle class in countries such as China, India and Vietnam, where international education is seen as a pathway to social mobility and better employment prospects (Rizvi, 2011). Moreover, the rise of neoliberalism has led to reduced public funding for HE and increased market competition (Findlay et al., 2012), prompting HEIs to become increasingly reliant on the collection of tuition fees from self-funded international students (Rizvi, 2011).

Beyond the economic drivers of ISM growth, there are pedagogical and humanistic reasons for attracting international students. In the knowledge economy, international students are often seen as having enhanced skills, including language and intercultural skills (Hawthorne & To, 2014). Therefore, many countries that traditionally attract many international students (e.g., Australia, Canada, the UK and the U.S.) manage ISM by shifting migration policies to attract and balance student movements (Gutema et al., 2024; Legusov et al., 2026). This has resulted in a global phenomenon of “two-step” student migration, with the first “step” being a student visa and the second “step” being a transition to a temporary working visa and eventually permanent residency (Hawthorne, 2010). Moreover, major source countries such as China and Singapore have increasingly recognised the value of international graduates and the risk of talent loss (Tharenou & Seet, 2014) and have implemented various policies to encourage repatriation, such as China’s 21st Five-Year Plan and Singapore’s 21 Project (Lin, 2023).

Despite the global competition for this highly educated population (Hawthorne & To, 2014), the ISM has not received sufficient attention in the literature. Much of the literature focuses on the pre-mobility phase, particularly on students’ motivations for studying abroad (Luo et al., 2023). However, the post-graduation phase, in which students make critical decisions about their future place of residence, remains largely overlooked, despite these decisions being strongly linked to many countries’ strategic economic agendas.

The few studies that explore students’ post-graduation decisions show an imbalanced focus, predominantly examining the rationale for remaining in the host country (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). This may stem from an underlying economic framework that treats international education as an investment, positioning the host country in a superior position and assuming that international students are expected to stay after graduation. Under the prevailing economic framing, students’ post-graduation mobility decisions are often consistent with

their predeparture destination choice, guided by the predictable and calculative logic of maximising returns on investment. One example is the commonly used push–pull model in exploring ISM. Although the push–pull model provides a foundational understanding of migration decisions, it may oversimplify the process of student mobility, attributing it to the destination country’s attractive characteristics and the home country’s unfavourable conditions (Li & Dembereldorj, 2026).

However, scattered evidence (e.g., that of López-Duarte et al. (2021)) suggests that ISM trends are diverse across student groups and often vary by socioeconomic background. Moreover, this imbalanced focus on students’ decisions to remain in the host country may undermine other mobility decisions and marginalise the effects of other mobility outcomes (Gümüş et al., 2020). This may lead to a limited understanding of the ISM trend and contribute to a significant literature gap, especially regarding return migration (Singh, 2020). This gap is especially important to address now, as the rate of international graduates returning home, especially from countries such as China, has been increasing recently (Singh, 2020; Tharenou & Seet, 2014).

Therefore, this scoping review aims to holistically explore international students’ post-graduation mobility decisions, providing the opportunity to explore potential influences on different decisions and understand the dynamics of the decision-making process across diverse international student populations in a global context. In line with the purpose of this review, Derek Layder’s (1998) adaptive theory was used to guide the analysis and inform the conceptualisation of the findings. According to Layder (1998), rigid reliance on general theory may lead to the insertion of preconceived ideas, which not only limits the potential to identify additional themes but also risks shifting the focus of research to theory testing and verification. Conversely, relying solely on a grounded approach may impoverish theoretical development and hinder knowledge accumulation, particularly through prioritising the subjective meaning of people over social systems (Layder, 1998). Adaptive theory addresses both aspects, suggesting that theorisation should be shaped by emerging research evidence and filtered through the extant relevant theoretical frameworks (Layder, 1998). For this review, the adoption of an adaptive approach enabled the open exploration of international students’ mobility plans without restricting decision-making to a purely rational behaviour driven by careful calculations of returns on investment. Moreover, it assisted in the identification and refinement of themes in relation to the predominant economic framework underpinning existing understanding.

The overarching research question guiding the review was as follows: What is known in the current literature about international students’ post-graduation mobility decisions? The specific subquestion was as follows: What factors influence international students’ post-graduation destination choices?

METHOD

A scoping review protocol was developed in accordance with Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) 5-stage framework and the Joanna Briggs Institute’s (JBI)

preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018).

A series of search terms was developed by Author 1 to identify relevant studies, and different combinations of terms were tested in August 2024 on multiple databases, including the Education Database, Web of Science, ProQuest Central, Sociological Abstracts, Scopus and PsycINFO. Specifically, the terms were designed to yield studies that considered international students' post-graduation destination choices rather than their decisions on the country of study or course. The terms were revised on the basis of the exploratory search results, and new terms were added from the identified publications when relevant. The final version of the search terms used for this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Search terms for this review

Construct Category	Terms
Population	“international student*”, “overseas student*”, “foreign student*”, “student migrant*”, “international mobile student*”, “international graduate*”, “cross-border student”
Outcomes	decision-making, stay, go, leave, “intention* to stay”, “intention* to leave”, “decision* to stay”, “decision* to leave”, “inclination to stay”, “motivation* to stay”, “decision* to remain”, remain, “plan after graduation”, post-graduation, “further stay”, “migratory decision*”, “brain drain”, “choose to”, “push pull”, migra*, push, pull
Context	“host nation”, “host country”, “destination country”, “home country”, “host nation job market”, “host job market”

Search strategy

The databases used for this study include ProQuest Central, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science and Scopus. These four databases present a combination of discipline-specific and interdisciplinary databases to provide more holistic search results. The scope of the initial search was limited to empirical studies published between 2000 and August 2024. This allowed us to gauge the most recent and relevant findings in the field without compromising the breadth of the search. In addition, only publications published primarily in English were considered.

Covidence, a literature review management program, was used to record and screen the search results. A total of 2160 publications were added, with 424 duplicates then removed.

Study selection

Review and screening consisted of two stages: (1) title and abstract review and (2) full-text review. In addition to the above criteria, additional screening criteria were developed and adopted at this stage to ensure the cohesion of scope

across selected articles. In particular, only empirical studies concerning higher education were selected; vocational education and training (VET) and other tertiary education sectors were excluded because of differences in institutional characteristics and disparities across international student groups (see Figure 1). Additionally, only papers published after the year 2000 were selected to ensure that the most up-to-date empirical evidence was included.

As international students can be divided into a variety of groups with overlapping yet different characteristics (Prazeres, 2013), for this review, only degree-mobile students were considered, i.e., students who were enrolled in a full degree program at an overseas institution. Even though degree-seeking students and short-term exchange students are generally expected to return to their home country to complete their programs (López-Duarte et al., 2021).

To ensure consistency of screening, during the title and abstract review, approximately 20% of the studies (n = 340) were double-screened (i.e., screened individually by two researchers). Prior to screening, the screening criteria were discussed, revised, and clarified over several meetings to calibrate the understanding of the criteria, minimise confusion, and ensure clarity and consistency. No conflicts were detected. A total of 65 studies remained after the two-stage screening process and were therefore included in the final sample. An outline of the screening process is presented in Figure 1.

Data extraction, analysis and synthesis

Data were extracted and recorded in Microsoft Excel, capturing key characteristics of each study: title, author(s), publication year, journal, methodology, research aim, sample size and source, context, analytical method, theoretical framework, and the respective study's key findings related to reasons for staying or leaving. Most data were drawn from the findings section; however, for studies that took a narrative approach, the full texts were reviewed. Author(s') conclusions from the discussion and conclusion sections were also included to assist with the data analysis.

The results were collated and summarised by Author 1, who produced two datasets: one consisting of study characteristics and the other focusing on the factors influencing students' post-graduation mobility decisions. The latter was categorised by data type (qualitative or quantitative) and by evidence category (reasons for staying or reasons for leaving).

Microsoft Excel and NVivo 14 were used for analysis. Adaptive theory was applied during the analysis. To enable open exploration of potential factors influencing students' mobility decisions, an inductive approach was used in the initial coding process, allowing themes to emerge without being constrained by any existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Word chunks were identified and coded for meaning, with individual chunks assigned to multiple codes where appropriate. The development of themes and subthemes continued throughout the coding process, and the coding tree was adjusted accordingly.

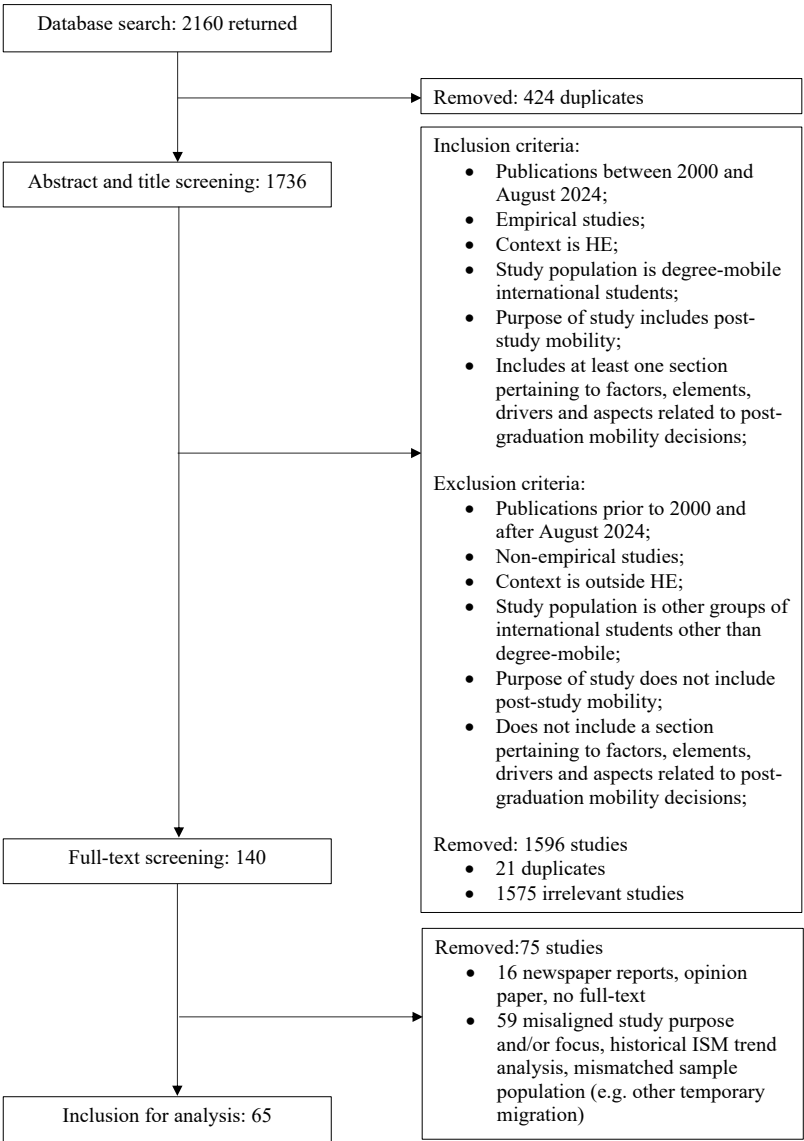


Figure 1: PRISMA flow chart of the screening process

A deductive method was later introduced to cluster similar codes and develop broader conceptual themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was informed primarily by the findings in the reviewed studies, many of which were guided by existing theories and conceptual frameworks, as discussed in the following section. This resulted in 17 main themes. The grouping of the final five dimensions was informed by our research question exploring possible factors, with consideration of the codes' positioning in the original texts. This resulted in five distinctive yet not mutually exclusive dimensions: personal, career and employment, societal and cultural, connection, and policy and political factors.

To determine the significance of the factors, both the prevalence and the consistency of effects across the reviewed studies were considered. In addition, the synthesis of quantitative data considered the strength of the factors, which was determined by the analytical method in conjunction with the significance of the testing results. During data analysis, several meetings were held to clarify decisions on significant factors and refine themes, with theme adjustments continuing throughout the revisions.

RESULTS

Below, we present findings in relation to (a) the scope and composition of the relevant literature and (b) synthesis of results related to key factors in students' post-study migration decisions.

Characteristics of the reviewed studies

The final sample of identified literature comprised 65 studies, including 54 journal articles, 4 books or book chapters, 4 doctoral/master dissertations, 2 published in an organisational journal (i.e., university-run journals) and 1 conference paper.

Study scope and context

Most studies (77%, $n = 50$) focused specifically on international students' post-graduation mobility decisions and the factors influencing their intentions. The remaining 23% ($n = 15$) investigated broader ISM decisions, spanning pre-departure to post-graduation.

There was variation in how post-graduation decisions were defined. Among the 65 studies reviewed, more than three-quarters (78%, $n = 51$) conceptualised international students' post-graduation mobility as either remaining in the host country or returning to their home countries, without considering other possible mobility options.

In terms of the aims of the study, approximately 25% ($n = 16$) only examined decisions to stay in the host country, and 17% ($n = 11$) only investigated the decision to leave. Just over half (54%, $n = 35$) considered both options. The remaining three studies specifically examined reasons for not returning to the home country.

The majority of the reviewed studies (91%, $n = 59$) focused on a single host country. Three included two host nations for comparison, and one compared three. Two papers did not specify the context of the study but investigated international students from a single origin country. A breakdown of the study context is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Context breakdown of reviewed studies ($N = 65$)

Region	Country	Total number and percentage
North America		21 (32%)
	U.S.	19 (29%)
	Canada	3 (5%)
East Asia		11 (17%)
	China (mainland)	7 (11%)
	Japan	3 (5%)
	Hong Kong	1 (2%)
	South Korea	1 (2%)
	Taiwan	1 (2%)
Oceania		10 (15%)
	Australia	5 (8%)
	New Zealand	5 (8%)
Northern Europe		9 (14%)
	Finland	5 (8%)
	Denmark	3 (5%)
	Norway	1 (2%)
	Sweden	1 (2%)
Western Europe		8 (12%)
	Netherlands	3 (5%)
	UK	3 (5%)
	France	1 (2%)
	Germany	1 (2%)
Eastern Europe		3 (5%)
	Czech Republic	1 (2%)
	Latvia	1 (2%)
	Turkey	1 (2%)
Southern Europe		2 (3%)
	Portugal	1 (2%)
	Spain	1 (2%)

The majority of the studies were situated in traditional destination countries, such as the U.S. and Canada, with some research in emerging markets, namely, China. However, there is a noticeable gap in studies conducted in emerging markets, such as South America, Africa, and much of Asia, highlighting the need to broaden ISM research beyond Global North contexts and to develop a more nuanced understanding (Li & Dembereldorj, 2026; Luo et al., 2023). Notably, despite being among the most popular destination countries, the UK was the primary context in only three of the reviewed studies.

In line with the broader ISM literature (e.g., Prazeres, 2013; Rivza & Teichler, 2007), most studies explored “vertical mobility” (from the Global South to the Global North), with only a few explicitly exploring horizontal movement within regions, for example, within Europe (Vasiljeva, 2014) and East Asia (Yoon et al., 2013).

Sample population

Studies vary on the basis of students’ academic stage and background. More than half (58%, $n = 38$) focused on current international students at different stages (e.g., newly arrived, graduating), while 18% ($n = 12$) focused on graduated students. One paper (Nghia et al., 2022) focused on prospective international students. The variation in sample populations underscores the limitations of generalising findings and highlights the importance of nuanced interpretations.

Study design and theoretical frameworks

Most of the reviewed studies (77%, $n = 50$) adopted a cross-sectional design, and 23% ($n = 15$) implemented a longitudinal design. In terms of the methodological approach, more than half (51%, $n = 33$) were quantitative studies, 34% ($n = 22$) were qualitative, and 15% ($n = 10$) used mixed methods.

A wide range of theoretical approaches was used, although not always explicitly. The push–pull model was the most common (22%, $n = 14$), followed by migration theories (18%, $n = 12$), including stepwise migration ($n = 3$), ISM ($n = 3$) and transnationalism ($n = 3$). Capital theory was used in 14% ($n = 9$) of the studies, whereas behavioural theories were used in 11% ($n = 7$). Agency theories and economic frameworks each appeared in four studies (6%). A smaller number (5%, $n = 3$) drew on frameworks of identity, and 22% ($n = 14$) did not mention a guiding framework.

The use of migration, behavioural, and capital theories suggests that international students’ post-graduation mobility decisions are primarily viewed as calculated plans. The expectation of returns on various forms of investment often underpinned these approaches. In many cases, particularly in studies using the push–pull model, this interpretation was largely economic and focused on cross-country comparisons of opportunities, especially material improvement. Therefore, the emergence of certain themes reflected this interpretation, such as those related to working conditions, wages, and quality of life. However, such

approaches may overlook intangible factors, such as family ties or emotional considerations, that often fall outside rational decision-making models.

What factors matter the most?

The analysis synthesised findings on international students’ post-graduation mobility decisions, examining motivators and barriers. Data were thematically analysed separately by type (qualitative or quantitative) and decision outcome (staying or leaving). Seventeen main themes emerged from the 117 codes, which were further categorised into five dimensions: personal, career and employment, societal and cultural, connection, and policy and political factors. These dimensions generally highlight the areas and aspects to consider in international students’ post-graduation migration decisions and are not mutually exclusive. These dimensions and related themes are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of dimensions and themes (N = 65)

Dimension	Map of themes	Descriptions	Frequency of themes (n studies)
1. Personal factors		Factors related to students’ characteristics, backgrounds, personal experiences, perceptions and psychological factors	57
	Previous experiences	Previous learning; work and living experience; previous visit to host country; acculturation process	27
	Perceptions and sentiments	Feeling of attachment to a place; a sense of responsibility	21
	Intentions	Original intentions to study overseas; return on investment	19
	Academic backgrounds	Personal academic backgrounds (e.g., discipline, level of study, year of enrolment); institutional factors (e.g., institution type, location)	19
	Demographics	Personal level (e.g., age, gender, marital status); family level (e.g., SES background, parents’ education level)	17
	Financial backgrounds	Funding and scholarship status; income source	15

2. Career and employment	Factors related to students' work preference; employment and career considerations	51
	Employment opportunity	39
	Wage	19
	Work environment	13
	Market suitability	12
3. Societal and cultural factors	Factors describing societal features; cultural beliefs and country's characteristics	48
	Social values and cultural considerations	30
	Quality of life	24
	Country of origin	17
4. Connection	Factors related to social connections and relations	43
	Family	38
	Social networks	21
5. Policy and political factors	Factors related to country-level policies and political environment	25
	Policy-related factors	21
	Political factors	10

Dimension 1: Personal factors

Personal factors were the most frequently identified dimension and were discussed in 88% (n = 57) of the studies. These factors were generally related to students' experiences, perceptions, and background characteristics (see Table 3).

Previous experiences were found to influence students' post-study migratory decisions. In particular, academic satisfaction in the host country generally leads to students' decision to stay (Kim, 2015). Conversely, negative experiences such as challenging encounters during the job search (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021) and limited networking opportunities (Kwon et al., 2023) were linked to the decision to leave.

A sense of belonging was also critical to students' decisions, although its definition varied across studies. For example, researchers variously understood it as social integration (Mosneaga & Winther, 2013) or as established social connections with locals who can bring about cultural experiences of the host country (Belle et al., 2022; Wu & Wilkes, 2017), all of which influenced mainly students' decisions to stay in the host country. On the other hand, lacking a sense of belonging, specifically reflected in students' feelings of alienation (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Alves et al., 2024), or not having a sense of community often led to the decision to leave (Kumai, 2017; Nghia et al., 2022; Wu & Wilkes, 2017).

On the same note, the state of students' acculturation was found to impact their migratory decisions (Musumba et al., 2011). Discussions around acculturation were somewhat interconnected with the students' social integration and sense of belonging (e.g., Nikou & Luukkonen, 2024) but underscored the process of adaptation and adjustment to the host country. Specifically, becoming accustomed to the host country's daily life fostered a sense of familiarity and comfort, leading students to stay (Mosneaga & Winther, 2013; Wu & Wilkes, 2017). In some cases, the process of becoming familiar with the host country's culture could even hinder students' ability to readjust to the home country's context, which fortifies the desire to stay in the host country (Ortiga, 2011).

Background factors (academic, financial and demographic) had inconsistent effects on students' decisions. For instance, findings on gender effects have been mixed: Some studies (e.g., Agbonlahor & Ampaw, 2021; Musumba et al., 2011; Tan & Hugo, 2017; Vasiljeva, 2014) have reported that female students are more likely to stay in the host country, whereas others (e.g., Soon, 2010b; Tansel & Nil, 2003; Veerasamy et al., 2019) have reported no significant differences. Similar inconsistencies were observed for other background factors, such as age and marital status.

Dimension 2: Career and employment factors

More than three-quarters (78%, n = 51) of the studies identified a range of career and employment factors that impact international students' post-graduation migratory decisions. Most discussions focused on the impact of employment opportunities (see Table 3).

International students were found to be strongly attracted to locations offering the best job and career advancement opportunities, which were not necessarily limited to either the host or home country (Musumba et al., 2011). The determination of which location held the best career potential largely depended on students' perceptions and expectations regarding securing future employment (King & Gëdeshi, 2023; Kwon et al., 2023). These perceptions were influenced mainly by students' previous job search experiences, particularly the negative ones associated with visa restrictions and a sense of marginalisation in the host country (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021; Lin, 2023; Mosneaga & Winther, 2013; Mulvey, 2023). Additionally, the definition of employment opportunity was inconsistent across studies, which included career-related professional job opportunities (Mosneaga & Winther, 2013; Rueff-Lopes et al., 2024) and high-salary jobs (King & Gëdeshi, 2023; Nikou & Luukkonen, 2024). However, most studies fail to clearly articulate such concepts and often use only vague notions of "employment opportunities" or "good jobs" (Gesing & Glass, 2019; Yoon et al., 2013).

International students were also attracted to locations that offered higher wages and better working environments, although the conclusions were inconsistent across studies. For instance, some studies (e.g., Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Rueff-Lopes et al., 2024) have reported that students from low-income countries or countries facing financial crises tend to prioritise wages in their decision-making. Ortiga (2011) found otherwise for Filipino doctoral students in the U.S. In terms of the work environment, inconsistencies arose mainly in how the concept of a "better work environment" was interpreted. These included aspects such as work culture (Nghia et al., 2022; Ortiga, 2011), work style (Kwon et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023), and work conditions (Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Nghia et al., 2022).

Dimension 3: Societal and cultural factors

The significance of societal factors in students' post-graduation mobility decisions was identified by 74% (n = 48) of the reviewed studies. The factors in this dimension included societal norms and values, cultural considerations, quality of life, and other country-related factors (see Table 3).

Social values were important in students' decisions and were often closely intertwined with students' previous experiences in both the home and host countries. This was especially critical for certain groups of students, such as female and sexual and ethnic minority students, as a motivator to remain in the host country with freedom and liberty (Belle et al., 2022; Nghia et al., 2022; Wu & Wilkes, 2017) and to escape discrimination or persecution back home (Alberts & Hazen, 2005). Conversely, for some, the perception of xenophobia or direct encounters with racism in the host country strongly discouraged them from staying (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Kumai, 2017; Lin, 2023).

Additionally, cultural considerations, particularly the degree of alignment between students' cultural beliefs and the host country's cultural practices, were found to impact students' migratory decisions (Nghia et al., 2022). However, the

synthesis highlights that studies that mention cultural considerations tended to find misalignment. For instance, some students were found to be discouraged by differing understandings of “friendship” in the host country (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Similarly, Kumai (2017) suggested that the sharp cultural contrast between the U.S. and Nigeria was a strong reason that some Nigerian students left the U.S.

Moreover, quality of life is a critical factor influencing students’ decisions (Musumba et al., 2011) and mostly serves as a driver of the rationale to stay in the host country after graduation. However, the interpretations of quality of life varied across studies, with some (e.g., Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021) viewing quality of life as students’ preferred lifestyle. Others were more focused on economic elements, such as a higher living standard (e.g., lower cost of living) (Liu et al., 2023), better living conditions (Alves et al., 2024; Musumba et al., 2011), advanced infrastructure (Kumai, 2017), and developed welfare and social services systems (Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Mosneaga & Winther, 2013).

Dimension 4: Connection

Another dimension of influence was related to international students’ existing connections, identified in 43 studies (66%). Most notably, these were related to family connections and social networks, particularly friend circles (see Table 3).

Family ties were critical in students’ considerations, with varied meanings based on the location in which they intended to reside. For instance, family ties were referred mainly to as obligations to care for parents when they serve as motivators to return home (Yu, 2016) and were often associated with value-induced responsibilities to care for elderly individuals in the home country (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; King & Gëdeshi, 2023; Rakovcová, 2017). As a reason to stay in the host country, family ties often referred to having a spouse, particularly a partner from the host country (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021; Tan & Hugo, 2017), or, less frequently, having children (Alberts & Hazen, 2005).

Additionally, the strength of family ties was significant (Soon, 2010a), although it may depend on other factors, such as a partner’s nationality (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021b), level of study (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a), and marital status (Kim, 2015). Generally, weak family ties in the home country led to the decision to stay in the host country, and vice versa (Soon, 2014).

Social networks were also noted as a key influence on students’ post-graduation mobility plans, although they referred to different types depending on the migratory decision. In describing the rationale of returning home, social networks were framed mainly as close friends (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021; Rueff-Lopes et al., 2024; Soon, 2014) and were often mentioned in tandem with comments about family; the two were often interdependent. However, as a reason to stay in the host country, social networks remained mostly at a professional level, including business partners (Mulvey, 2023) and professional networks (Gesing & Glass, 2019).

Dimension 5: Policy and political factors

Only 38% (n = 25) of the studies identified policy and political reasons for shaping students' post-graduation mobility plans (see Table 3).

Students were observed to consider the effects of policies on their decisions about mobility after graduation. With respect to the host country's policies, students focused mainly on immigration policies and visa schemes (Tan & Hugo, 2017), particularly the challenges of securing PR or citizenship (Rueff-Lopes et al., 2024), obtaining temporary post-study work permits (Lin, 2023), or engaging in transnational mobility (Yu, 2016). With respect to the home country's policies, students' considerations reflected some source countries' efforts to combat potential brain drain, as seen in countries such as China (Alberts & Hazen, 2005).

Additionally, political situations, particularly those in students' home countries, were found to influence their post-graduation migration decisions, especially regarding the choice not to return. These considerations predominantly involved bureaucratic obstacles, such as a lack of accountability (Belle et al., 2022), administrative redundancy (King & Gëdeshi, 2023), and corruption (Alberts & Hazen, 2005). Less frequently, political instability was also cited as a major barrier to return, although this concern was mostly relevant for students from specific countries, such as Albania and Turkey (King & Gëdeshi, 2023).

DISCUSSION

This scoping review synthesised findings from 65 empirical studies and identified five key dimensions influencing international students' post-graduation mobility decisions: personal, career and employment, societal and cultural, connection, policy and political factors.

While the reviewed studies varied in their contextual focus, student populations, study designs, and theoretical frameworks, this scoping review identified several trends in the field of international students' post-graduation mobility. First, studies tended to implement a considerably narrow scope. This is evident in the dominance of single-country studies and those that target only current international students. This may limit the generalisability and applicability of the findings to a wider range of countries and populations. Additionally, many studies have only examined students' post-graduation decisions at a single point in time. This perhaps overlooks changes in students' decisions over time, which could otherwise provide valuable insights that more accurately reflect international students' key areas of concern and needs during decision-making.

In terms of students' post-graduation mobility plans, while many of these studies frame students' decisions through a rationalist or economically driven perspective—often positioning international education as an investment—our analysis reveals that students' decision-making is more complex, nonlinear, and shaped by personal, sociocultural, and institutional contexts.

Previous experiences (academic, work and living) in the host country, perceived future employment opportunities, alignment with social values, and the degree of acculturation emerged as particularly influential in shaping students'

destination preferences. In addition, practical considerations such as family responsibilities and immigration policies played important roles. Below, we discuss four interrelated insights that challenge the dominant framings of international student mobility: 1) the individualised and contextual nature of students' mobility decisions; 2) the limitations of return-on-investment logic; 3) the inadequacy of binary stay-or-return frameworks; and 4) the need to rethink theoretical approaches to international student mobility. These insights highlight the importance of adopting new conceptual and methodological approaches in future research.

Situated and contextual decisions

While factors such as employment opportunities and quality of life are consistently found to be central to international students' post-graduation decision-making, our review reveals that individual circumstances critically shape these decisions in ways that cannot be captured by universalised models such as push-pull. Specifically, students' decisions are influenced by their unique contextual backgrounds and personal experiences, resulting in varied outcomes, even when similar factors are involved.

For example, family responsibilities, life stage, and cultural background influence how students weigh their mobility options. As Alberts and Hazen (2005) note, family ties can significantly influence students' decisions, but their impact varies. Mature students (Rakovcová & Drbohlav, 2022), students from countries lacking robust social systems (Rakovcová, 2017), or those from cultural backgrounds that emphasise familial duty (e.g., Asia, Albania) (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; King & Gëdeshi, 2023) often feel strong obligations to return home. Students from single-child families may also experience stronger familial expectations (Rakovcová & Drbohlav, 2022; Yu, 2016).

Moreover, students' mobility decisions are often shaped by unpredictable and subjective experiences. Encounters with racism (Gesing & Glass, 2019), job-seeking challenges (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021), peer influence (Baas, 2015), or sudden changes in personal circumstances (Yu, 2016) can all shift plans suddenly. These examples illustrate the nonlinear and dilemmatic nature of decision-making (Alberts & Hazen, 2005), which many existing models fail to address.

Overall, the review reveals that students' post-graduation decisions are interpretive, contextual and, at times, non-strategic. This challenges dominant models that assume that decisions are primarily rational or economically motivated. Future ISM research should adopt frameworks that recognise this complexity and differentiate more clearly between student groups and contexts.

Beyond return-on-investment logic

Much of the literature on international students' post-graduation mobility is framed within return-on-investment (ROI) logic, where decisions are seen as economic calculations. While financial considerations are important, our review

shows that this framing is too narrow to capture the full range of students' motivations.

Non-economic factors such as social values, family, or a sense of belonging often play a pivotal role in students' mobility plans. For instance, romantic relationships can outweigh financial reasoning (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021), whereas government policy requirements such as return conditions tied to scholarships (Veerasamy et al., 2019), compulsory military service (Tansel & Nil, 2003), or a sudden change in personal circumstances (Yu, 2016) may drive students to make decisions that diverge from ROI logic.

The ROI model also reinforces a vertical mobility narrative in which students from developing countries are viewed as upgrading to more advanced systems (Börjesson, 2017). This perspective tends to downplay students' own views of what constitutes a good life, with the assumption that host countries inherently offer a superior quality of life and that staying is the most logical choice. As a result, students' decisions to stay are often seen as practical responses to improved conditions rather than reflecting more personal or cultural reasons (e.g., Alves et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2013).

Additionally, the dominance of ROI logic risks narrowing research, often excluding other forms of mobility, such as horizontal movement between countries with similar levels of development. For students pursuing these pathways, the factors shaping their mobility decisions and actions may differ from those following vertical pathways (Vasiljeva, 2014). The ROI framework also marginalises pathways other than staying in the host country, particularly returning to the home country. Evidence suggests that, for these students, a sense of responsibility to contribute to local communities and support national development is often a primary motivator (First-Quao, 2013; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2021). While the number of international students returning to their home countries is increasing, the dominant ROI framework does not adequately account for this trend, highlighting the need for alternative approaches that account for a wider range of student experiences.

Rethinking stay-or-return binaries

Our review shows that 78% of the reviewed literature conceptualises international students' post-graduation options through a binary lens—either staying in the host country or returning home. However, this dichotomous approach has faced criticism from several scholars (e.g., Wu & Wilkes, 2017). Our analysis supports these critiques by identifying three key characteristics of students' decision-making processes that resist such binary categorisation: fluidity, uncertainty, and temporality.

Fluidity is evident in how international students' plans change throughout their studies and after graduation. Longitudinal studies show that mobility plans are in flux, a process that begins the moment students arrive in the host country and continues throughout their educational sojourn (Tansel & Nil, 2003). In some cases, migratory decisions continue to evolve after graduation (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; King & Gëdeshi, 2023). This fluidity may stem from new perceptions, fresh

experiences or sudden changes in circumstances, such as shifts in employment opportunities or social values, as mentioned earlier. Consequently, the pathway to decision-making is rarely linear; rather, it is characterised by evolution and paradoxes (Baas, 2015).

Uncertainty is another key characteristic of students' decision-making processes, as intentions do not always align with actions. Several studies have shown that some international students who initially intended to leave the host country eventually stayed or delayed their return, while others who intended to stay ultimately left (Alves et al., 2024). This discrepancy highlights the need to examine the factors behind these mismatches. Compared with an outcome-oriented approach, Baas (2015) proposes that a more process-oriented approach may more accurately reflect the ambivalence of post-graduation decisions. To capture the dynamic nature of students' post-graduation decisions, future research could incorporate varying levels of probability in their analyses. For instance, Soon's (2010a) study offers a more nuanced categorisation by including "probably return", "probably not return", and "definitely not return" in their exploration of students' intentions.

Temporality also plays a role. Students frequently distinguish between short- and long-term plans, with different drivers shaping each (e.g., Kingminghae & Lin, 2019; Mulvey, 2023; Tansel & Nil, 2003). For instance, short-term plans may prioritise professional development, while long-term plans are influenced by family considerations (Rakovcová & Drbohlav, 2022). However, what qualifies as "short" or "long" terms is inconsistently defined across studies (e.g., Kingminghae & Lin, 2019; Tansel & Nil, 2003), suggesting the need for clearer temporal frameworks in future research.

Reframing theoretical approaches

This review highlights the continued dominance of simplified theoretical models—especially the push–pull framework—in shaping how international students' post-graduation mobility decisions are understood. While this framework offers a structured way to compare influencing factors, it has notable limitations. It often treats these factors as fixed and universally relevant, overlooking the individual differences and sociopolitical complexities that shape students' experiences.

As shown throughout this review, students' decisions are informed by subjective interpretations, unanticipated life events, and shifting priorities over time. These elements do not fit neatly into linear models and point to the need for more flexible and responsive theoretical approaches. Similarly, the vertical mobility perspective, which conceptualises international student movement as a progression from "developing" to "developed" systems, reproduces hierarchical assumptions and overlooks alternative patterns such as horizontal mobility (Vasiljeva, 2014).

To advance our understanding of this topic, future research should adopt models that better account for individual agency, the temporal nature of decision-making, and the wider social and political contexts in which decisions are made.

Approaches such as transnationalism, process-oriented approaches, and relational frameworks may offer more nuanced lenses to understand the diversity and complexity of international students' post-graduation mobility. These alternatives can capture the dynamic and varied nature of students' decisions and help build a deeper, more accurate understanding of their post-graduation pathways.

Limitations

This study provides a valuable synthesis and analysis of the current literature pertaining to international students' post-graduation mobility decisions and influencing factors. However, there are limitations inherent to scoping reviews that warrant consideration.

First, it is possible that our search terms did not capture all the relevant literature. Limitations also derive from the specific constraint of our searches, including the exclusion of studies written in languages other than English. Similarly, the 65 reviewed studies may not represent all the extant literature on the topic and are limited by the selected databases and search terms. In addition, an overrepresentation of articles contextualised in the Global North limits the generalisability of our findings across various contexts. Finally, thematic analysis was employed for this review, carried out by Author 1. It is important to note that the results derived from this analysis may not encompass the complete range of potential influences, as data loss can occur during coding and interpretations may reflect the subjective understanding of context by Author 1.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this review was to understand what is known in the current literature regarding international students' post-graduation mobility decisions. In particular, we investigated the key factors influencing students' decision-making. We revealed that while international students' post-graduation mobility decisions can involve a series of considerations that are economically oriented and practicality driven, such as improvements in living standards and immigration policies, the rationalisation process is much more nuanced. It is often situational and contextual and characterised by fluidity, uncertainty and sometimes dilemmas. Furthermore, students might change their decisions as they gain new experiences and realign their priorities. The literature, however, tends to overlook this complexity, focusing instead on the calculative nature of decision-making, particularly through comparisons between disparities in host and home countries based on vertical pathways.

Therefore, we recommend that future research on ISM move away from universal models such as push-pull theory and capital theory. Instead, we suggest adopting models that more accurately reflect and capture the complexity and dynamics of individual decisions while also acknowledging the varied broader socioeconomic and political contexts for different students. Moreover, more attention is needed on additional forms of mobility that diverge from the dominant vertical pathway. This approach contributes to a more holistic understanding of

international students' mobility decisions beyond ROI and would be especially valuable in today's context of an increasing number of international graduates returning to their home countries.

Our review highlights several key areas for policy and practice. The findings clarify that policies alone are not sufficient for attracting and retaining international graduates; enhancing the student experience is crucial, particularly in terms of aspects related to their academic, living, work, and social experiences. For host countries, this could mean better support students' acculturation and social integration, which are likely to foster a sense of belonging and positive perceptions among students toward the host country. To achieve this goal, collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., universities, unions, and communities) may be necessary to ensure a smooth, holistic transition from the source country to the host country. For source countries, while policy incentives could attract graduates to return, ensuring a foreseeable future, especially regarding secured employment opportunities, could further accelerate the attractiveness of the home country. Additionally, source countries could rely on cultural resonance and students' sense of social responsibility to attract more graduates to return.

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☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*

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