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Reimagining Internationalization in Higher Education in the Post-COVID Era

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the internationalization of student mobility at higher education institutions (HEIs), specifically in the post-COVID era. The opportunities and challenges in the internationalization of student mobility for non-degree-seeking students are examined through a systematic literature review (SLR) using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. During and after the pandemic, HEIs worldwide have faced major challenges in reimplementing internationalization within student mobility. The objective of this study is to employ the matrix system of Webster and Watson (2002) to categorize the identified literature. Facilitating the identification of essential columns that are considered indispensable in the post-COVID era. The findings of these studies provide a foundation for further research approaches and offer recommendations and implications to support HEIs in developing strategies to increase the number of international students at the international level.*

Keywords: Higher education Internationalization, International students, Student mobility, Post-COVID era

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INTRODUCTION

This study explores the state of internationalization in higher education in the post-COVID era, addressing current opportunities and challenges to inform future research aimed at developing actionable recommendations. Within international higher education, it is particularly important to examine current trends such as globalization processes and potential challenges of the post-COVID era (Gultekin, 2025). These challenges stem from the global shifts that have emerged since the pandemic and their implications for the internationalization processes within HEIs. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that academics and higher education institutions can be vulnerable when dealing with global health challenges (Mok & Montgomery, 2021). It is considered important to develop new strategies in the post-COVID era to address the challenges arising from shifts in internationalization to international student mobility (De Wit, 2023). In this study, the post-COVID-19 era is defined as the period of development after the COVID-19 pandemic from 2022 onward. While regions continue to feel the impact of these measures, the current literature on internationalization processes often refers to the post-pandemic era. The pandemic is reported to have had a significant impact on internationalization, particularly through the closure of national borders (Mok & Montgomery, 2021). During the pandemic, the higher education industry was characterized by distance learning and the challenges posed by insufficient infrastructure (Masalimova et al., 2022). At the same time, digitization processes gained importance as institutions adapted to COVID-related restrictions (Singun, 2025). The literature indicates a pronounced correlation between the ongoing digitalization of higher education and the pandemic's global effects. This broader “digital transformation” (Scholkmann et al., 2024, p.1355) has had a considerable impact on student mobility during the pandemic. A notable research gap exists in the comprehensive examination of the opportunities and challenges emerging in the post-COVID era. A systematic review of literature published since 2022 is required to connect and compare the categories used to classify these effects and evaluate their relative significance.

Grounded in the literature, this study critically examines the following key research questions to advance the understanding of the identified gaps:

- What opportunities and challenges do the internationalization efforts of HEIs – especially in the post-COVID era – yield for international students?
- What measures do HEIs focus on in student mobility in the context of internationalization in the post-COVID era?

The research questions will be addressed through a systematic literature review (SLR), drawing on current research in the field of internationalization. To illustrate the selection of literature, a flow chart regarding the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework was developed to systematically describe the keywords of challenges and opportunities (Page et al., 2021). The SLR is conducted in accordance with the approach outlined by Webster & Watson (2002). This research seeks to

investigate the effects from political, economic, and sociocultural perspectives. These categories are particularly relevant, as current research conceptualizes student mobility as a dynamic interplay between socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors (Hong et al., 2025). Building on this categorization, the individual subject areas are further delineated to facilitate a more targeted implementation of recommendations. The study contributes to existing research by enabling HEIs to derive recommendations for refining their internationalization strategies, with a particular focus on increasing the number of international students in the post-COVID era. Upon completion of the study, the research question will be revisited and synthesized in a matrix summarizing the key opportunities and challenges identified through the data analysis. Furthermore, a comprehensive review of the current literature is conducted to provide an understanding of the present situation. By situating the analysis within the post-COVID context, the study highlights contemporary opportunities and challenges, thereby establishing a foundation for future research aimed at generating actionable recommendations for HEIs.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND FUTURE RESEARCH

During the literature review, two central phenomena were explored, which have emerged as particularly relevant in the context of post-COVID internationalization.

The process of internationalization

The conceptual representation of internationalization describes how a change has accompanied the process in recent years. No direct model of internationalization can be identified; rather, the changes can be seen as challenges in the internationalization of higher education. The term internationalization is not a uniform concept; instead, there are key aspects that influence the process (De Wit, 2023, p.15).

Based on the last 30 years, various trends in internationalization can be identified that play a significant role. The literature discusses various trends in internationalization, including political, sociocultural, and economic changes, and the development of internationalization from an international perspective (De Wit, 2020). The current lack of literature on the subject is especially pronounced when addressing contemporary challenges in the context of internationalization (De Wit, 2023). In the context of today's challenges, various aspects are explicated, with digitalization playing an increasingly important role. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on virtual internationalization are described as centering on the use of digitalization within contemporary internationalization processes (Bruhn-Zass, 2022). From this perspective, VI can be seen as an interface between current trends in internationalization and global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Bruhn-Zass, 2022). Virtual internationalization is understood as a process shaped by the interplay between teaching and virtual communication, and its further development is expected to require stronger cooperation among higher education institutions. These different perspectives on

approaches to digitalization in the context of internationalization reveal a more detailed examination of the aspects involved. Regarding current internationalization strategies, transnational education (TNE) in the context of the post-COVID era has become particularly relevant after the pandemic due to the linking of digital offerings (De Wit et al., 2025).

A connection can be established with the phenomenon of virtualization in that online offerings have the capacity to promote TNE. This process is thus another definition in the context of current internationalization, which differs from explanations of digitalization in that it covers the field from a broader perspective.

Student Mobility and COVID-19

Student mobility is recognized as a long-standing phenomenon that can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when international students first emerged. (Rivza & Teichler, 2007). The use of these resources enables tracing the origins of student mobility. Rivza & Teichler (2007) propose that challenges of student mobility today have arisen more because of changes in the context of the “knowledge society” (Rivza & Teichler, 2007, p. 459). When considering the definitions, different perspectives on the meaning of mobility emerge within the explanations of the phenomenon. According to de De Wit & Altbach (2021), student mobility is the realization of a semester abroad and thus the movement of a study stay in another country. These findings suggest that student mobility cannot be considered in isolation but must be analyzed in relation to broader educational transformations. It is important to note that in this context, the duration of stay abroad is a determining factor. This can range from as short as one month to up to one year. In this context, the term 'international students' refers to individuals who are not from the host country and are residing there temporarily to pursue their studies. The duration of this placement can vary, ranging from a year to a few months, or even a shorter period, such as summer or winter school. The previous education was obtained in their home country (OECD, 2025). Various factors influenced student mobility during the pandemic, which can be interpreted through micro, meso, and macro social science perspectives, as noted by Mok and Zhang (2022, p.241). The “micro level” (Mok & Zhang, 2022, p.241) encompasses students’ personal characteristics and family circumstances, which may either facilitate or hinder participation in a semester abroad. Institutional conditions at the “meso level” (Mok & Zhang, 2022, p.241) play a crucial role, for instance, through the incorporation of mobility into different criteria or the quality of supervision provided to exchange students (Mok & Zhang, 2022). The macro level encompasses broader structural and societal factors, such as national infrastructure and the level of intercultural integration within the host country (Mok & Zhang, 2022). The challenges for students are identified as three main challenges. Financial resources and study conditions as well as sociocultural integration are considered essential in the context of internationalization (Mok & Zhang, 2022). Study conditions refer to the circumstances in which students engage in their academic work. These vary depending on the country and region. In contrast to a level-based perspective on student mobility, Hong et al. (2025)

demonstrate that the influencing factors for international students are organized into different categories. Student mobility was either completely prohibited during the pandemic or replaced by virtual programs (Yang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this trend has introduced challenges that require more in-depth investigation, such as the inadequate integration of local experiential opportunities within HEIs (Yang et al., 2022). In this context, de Wit (2023) highlights, in relation to this approach, the need for a more detailed investigation within his framework for critically examining internationalization. In addition, social interaction in the local area has also been negatively affected by COVID-19 (Di Pietro & Perez-Encinas, 2025). Social interaction emerges as a potentially critical dimension of student mobility. From this perspective, digital transformation could be leveraged to enhance social interaction within student mobility (Matsieli & Mutula, 2024). One way this is achieved is through virtual meetings or networking events for students.

In general, the current challenges in student mobility are still seen in the combination of virtuality and presence (Koris et al., 2021). It is evident that social interactions, in conjunction with digitalization, play a pivotal role in influencing student mobility. Based on the development of the factors that influence students in their decision to spend a semester abroad, it is important to examine the current state of development in the post-COVID era. In connection with this, some factors are economically or politically motivated alongside people's sociocultural decision-making processes based on feelings and personal circumstances that will be more focused on in the SLR. It is important to mention the significance of governments regarding student mobility regarding COVID-19 processes (Brunner, 2025). The extant literature cites political decisions as a decisive factor, while some authors describe the infrastructure or conditions of the country as being a critical factor. The notion that the political environment of a nation can influence its stability is well established. The extent to which these factors influence internationalization will be examined within the framework of the SLR.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach through a comprehensive literature review to systematically address the research questions.

Research Design and Conceptual Framework

As previously introduced, the systematic literature review (SLR) method has been employed as the research design underlying this study to examine current research topics and identify potential opportunities and challenges regarding the internationalization of HEIs. The review was reported according to PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure a systematic process in the selection of databases (Page et al, 2021). PRISMA is a model in which database design is conceptually described based on a report (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021).

An SLR has been used to fulfill the requirement of providing an overview of previous research in the subject area (Siddaway et al., 2019). The SLR is conducted to further develop the theoretical perspective that internationalization in higher education should be expanded in terms of strategy. This expansion is based on the current view. (De Wit et al., 2025). The political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions were selected as categories for the SLR based on a definition outlining current student mobility trends (Hong et al., 2025). The methodology was selected for its ability to code the factors in terms of their impact, thereby facilitating the development of a constructive matrix. According to the study by Webster & Watson (2002), employing a systematic literature review (SLR) together with a concept matrix involves critical analytical thinking and supports a structured comprehension of the literature within the respective research field. The literature review underlying this study was conducted between January and April 2025. The Web of Science database was selected due to its ability to apply specific filters and its classification of sources according to their scientific merit.

A literature search strategy was developed in alignment with the PRISMA conceptual framework (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). The fundamental terms pertinent to the search were initially delineated to identify the search strings. These include the concepts of Internationalization and Higher Education. The term 'OR' was not used as a connective because both sources addressed internationalization and higher education in answering the research questions. Using the "OR" operator would have yielded an excessively large number of results, many of which would not have been directly related to the core topics of internationalization and higher education. Using the operator "OR" with the term "internationalization" would remove the specific contextual focus on student mobility. Furthermore, a definition of the term internationalization has already been provided in the context of this study. The search string was identified as ("internationalization" AND "higher education"). Regarding the Boolean connection, the AND connector was used.

The search process identified 3,294 sources. In this context, only the title was considered for the search. In connection with the previously introduced definition of the post-COVID era, the scope was narrowed to the period from 2022 to 2025. The term 'pandemic' was not utilized because it does not restrict the specific reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore does not specifically expand the search radius of the results. This search yielded 1,741 results within the specified scope. The search strategy included consideration of journals, books, conference papers and supplementary material. It was determined that no restriction would be applied to the papers or journals alone, as it was anticipated that further restrictions would be imposed on the data. Due to the large volume of search results, the search string was further refined by including the term 'COVID'. The final identified search string was ("internationalization" AND "higher education" AND "COVID"). The number of results was subsequently reduced to 130. In this step, the title and abstract of the paper were given due consideration. The term was intentionally chosen to directly refer to the context of the pandemic. Using the phrase "post-COVID era" was considered overly

restrictive, as it might reduce the objectivity and scope of the search results. To achieve greater precision in the search results, the term “STUDENT” was incorporated into the search criteria. This addition ensured that the retrieved literature specifically focused on students rather than on education more broadly. The corresponding inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined below in the description of the data selection process.

Data Selection Process

Using the search string described above, a total of 92 sources were identified for inclusion in the study. The selected papers were initially screened based on their titles and abstracts. Among the 92 sources included, 65.2% adopt a global perspective, while 16.3% focus specifically on Asian countries. Analysis of the data further indicates that 9.8% of the articles concentrate in Europe, 4.4% in Australia, and 3.3% in the Americas. A minimal proportion, 1.1%, of the studies address the African region. There were no duplicate records that had to be removed before screening. To identify relevant articles, the records were screened based on the abstract and the title. An article was deemed relevant if the title and summary concentrated on higher education, rather than the pandemic itself, but rather on the subsequent developments. Based on an initial screening of titles and abstracts, 9 sources were excluded from the selected literature. Based on this initial screening process, inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed in accordance with the PRISMA concept for further refinement (Page et al., 2021). Eligibility was assessed for the articles identified, with several receiving the research of 83 papers. Inclusion and exclusion criteria can be defined as factors for analyzing suitable studies. These criteria are part of the selection process within the framework of literature analysis (Meline, 2006). The defined inclusion and exclusion criteria included the following guidelines, which were considered in the study. The first reason for excluding articles was that they describe a personal account of a development without a scientific background. These include self-portrayals of experiences. These are not considered scientifically relevant in the context of the study. Furthermore, the timeframe was limited to all sources from 2022 onward. When examining the results of the sources, it was found that, despite the restrictions to this year from 2022 onward, some studies dealt with other time periods. As these were not relevant to the research results, they were excluded. Studies of the results that did not deal directly with HEIs but rather with schools and primary developmental stages were also excluded, as this study is not concerned with adolescents but rather with young adults who undertake an international stay as part of their studies. Three inclusion criteria were established and deemed relevant for the scope of this study. First, the article had to be published after 2022. Second, the content needed to demonstrate a clear relevance to the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, the source was required to address the opportunities and challenges arising from the pandemic. Articles that did not engage with these themes were considered irrelevant and thus excluded. In total, 73 articles were found to be eligible for the PRISMA flowchart (Page et al., 2021). These were examined in terms of their full texts to determine the extent to which

the content might be relevant for the SLR. There were no restrictions in terms of utilized research methodologies present in the analyzed studies. In fact, both qualitative and quantitative research were examined, and mixed methods of approaches were also considered. Literature reviews were also included to build upon existing research findings and to ensure continuity with the current state of scholarly discourse. The following flow chart shows the process of identifying relevant studies, with a total of 73 sources. A detailed explanation of the procedure used to identify the 34 papers for the subcategories is provided below.

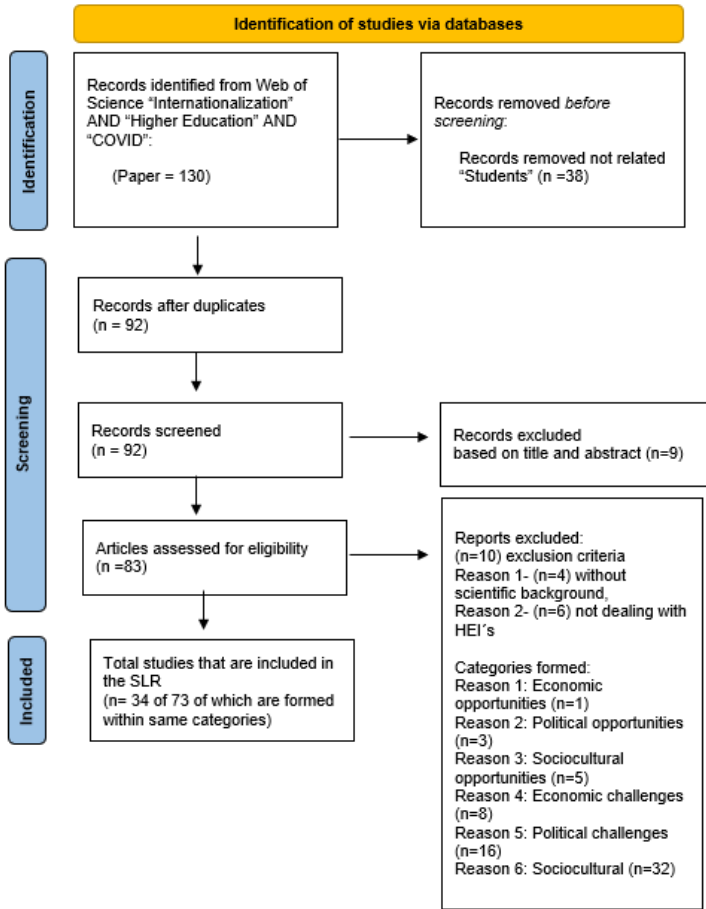


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart regarding Page et al. (2021)

Subsequently, the Webster & Watson (2002) method of designing a concept matrix was used. The use of a conceptual matrix in an SLR enables the identification and emphasis of the key concepts pertinent to the research topic. Above all, a tabular representation can provide a simplified overview of the results

(Webster & Watson, 2002). The clustering of the results should later enable weighting and thus prioritization of the current trends.

Selected Studies and Subcategories

The analysis was structured by classifying the identified opportunities and challenges into economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions, in accordance with the definition of student mobility proposed by Hong et al. (2025). Guided by SLR, the study conceptualizes contemporary student mobility as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by economic, political, and sociocultural factors. The categorization framework was informed by a review of relevant peer-reviewed journals, including the *Journal of International Students*, to ensure conceptual consistency with established research in the field (Hong et al., 2025, p. 2). Sociocultural factors were explicitly incorporated into the categorization framework as a core analytical category, reflecting their significance in explaining current patterns and dynamics of student mobility (Hong et al., 2025, p. 18).

The analytical structure presented below was generated through the coding process applied in constructing the matrix. For coding, a table was constructed to systematically assign the identified opportunities and challenges. The assessors carry out this process anonymously. To systematically evaluate the findings across the selected sources, categories were assigned numerical codes. This approach was adopted to enable the identification of frequency patterns in the correspondence between opportunities and challenges within the matrix. The category system was based on an exponential coding scheme, incorporating numerical values ranging from 1 to 32. Combinations that occurred only once were excluded to allow for the aggregation of frequencies across sources. This methodological decision enabled the reduction of the initial sample of 73 articles to 34 analytically relevant category combinations. Within the coding framework, opportunities were assigned the following values: economic (1), political (3), and sociocultural (5). Challenges were coded using higher exponential values, specifically economic (8), political (16), and sociocultural (32). By aggregating these numerical codes, identical combinations of opportunity and challenge subcategories could be systematically identified and recorded in the matrix. In this process, 37 combinations could be excluded, as they represented a one-time occurrence of the combination.

During this process, 37 category combinations were excluded because they represented single occurrences and therefore did not meet the threshold for inclusion. Additionally, six sources were excluded because they did not receive multiple mentions of the same opportunity or challenge category; these instances reflected isolated findings reported in individual studies. Following a more detailed examination of the abstracts, these sources were removed to ensure analytical consistency and conceptual clarity. As a result, 34 sources were retained in the final matrix for further analysis. The combinations of the analyzed results are summarized in Table 1. To maintain the quality and objectivity of the research findings, intercoder reliability was observed during the development of the subcategory titles. The subcategories were coded using a triangulation

methodology. Research triangulation shows the observer that the research process was validated from different perspectives to verify its accuracy (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Independent verification was carried out by two additional researchers, who reviewed the category definitions derived from the anonymized dataset to ensure rigor and reliability. The researchers were consulted solely for the purpose of the investigation and had no further involvement with the research findings. During this process, researchers independently developed and assigned category labels based on their interpretation of the data. The coding of the results is based on an evaluation of the extant literature, which means that no new data could be coded. In relation to the coding process, the initial step involved the creation of top-level categories. To ensure anonymity and minimize potential bias, the coding file was distributed to the researcher without labels for the top-level categories.

With respect to opportunities, the analysis resulted in the identification of three economic subcategories, two political subcategories, and two sociocultural subcategories. Regarding challenges, four economic subcategories, three political subcategories, and four sociocultural subcategories were identified. These figures are derived from the results of the coding matrix, which was constructed based on the frequency of recurring characteristics across the analyzed sources. Following the operational definition of the subcategories, the number of challenge categories was reduced. This decision was based on the observation that several terms and thematic areas exhibited substantial conceptual overlap and could therefore be consolidated into broader superordinate categories. As a result of this refinement process, the economic and sociocultural challenge categories were each reduced to two subcategories. During the discussion phase, the terms proposed by all three researchers were considered anonymously and systematically compared. On this basis, a consensus term was jointly established to define each subcategory. Overall, a high degree of similarity was observed among the proposed terms when assigning labels to the subcategories. Within the domain of digitalization, multiple alternative terms were identified; consequently, the researchers selected virtualization as the most appropriate and encompassing label. In addition, political decisions at both HEIs and governmental levels were further differentiated into distinct subcategories.

RESULTS

In accordance with the SLR framework, the research questions were addressed, including the opportunities and challenges that arise in the internationalization of international students and the key focus areas for HEIs. A matrix was created using the abovementioned methodology (Webster & Watson, 2002) to summarize the results of the qualitative research findings and align them with key opportunities and challenges. A total of 34 relevance factors associated with the identified opportunities and challenges were classified based on an analysis of 73 articles.

Table 1: Matrix regarding Webster & Watson (2002)

Authors	Opportunities			Challenges		
	Economic	Political	Social-cultural	Economic	Political	Socio-cultural
(Zhang & Zhu, 2022) (Sun et al., 2022)	x		x			x
(Amaro et al., 2024) (Bhatara & Khanna, 2024) (Sahasrabudhe et al., 2022) (Mairal, 2023)	x	x	x			
(Ivan et al., 2022) (Kafarski & Kazak, 2022) (Oggel et al., 2022) (Yue et al., 2023) (Lee & Mao, 2025) (Abdullah, D., & Singh, J. K. 2022.) (Benitone, 2023) (Hamada & Iwasaki, 2024) (Li et al., 2024) (Udah & Francis, 2022) (Ou et al., 2024a)		x	x			
(Jadrić et al., 2022) (Larran & Hein, 2025) (Moeller, 2025)		x			x	x
(Roshid & Ibna Seraj, 2023) (Fedorchenko et al., 2024)		x	x			x
(Woicolesco et al., 2022) (Skokauskas et al., 2023)			x	x	x	x
(Bathilla et al., 2022) (Novoselova, 2023) (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2025)			x	x		x
(Kor et al., 2022) (Peng & Dervin, 2024) (Charoensap-Kelly, P., & Punyanunt-Carter, N. (2023)			x			x
(Binah-Pollak & Yuan, 2022) (Li et al., 2024) (Xu et al., 2023) (Keshishi et al., 2023)			x		x	x

In essence, most authors tend to address different aspects of opportunities and risks. A thorough examination of the results in Table 1 reveals that the characteristics of the opportunities and challenges give rise to subcategories that should be considered when analyzing the results. During the creation of the subcategories, the key elements of the matrix were identified, and category names were determined in accordance with the process described in the section “Selected Studies and Subcategories.” It became apparent during this process that overlaps between categories could occur. In particular, the decisions of HEIs are based on the political internationalization strategies of the countries and regions. Given that sociocultural effects frequently emerge from underlying economic conditions, categorical distinctions can be defined only with limited precision.

Economic opportunities and challenges	Political opportunities and challenges	Socio-cultural opportunities and challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities: • Tech-enabled internationalization • Financial support • Access and Affordability in International Higher Education • Challenges: • Technological • Market barriers • Financial barriers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities: • Governmental Political Strategies • HEI's Political Strategies • Challenges: • External and Political instability • Post-Pandemic strategies and policies • Political collaboration barriers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities: • Virtualization • Student-Centered internationalization • Challenges: • Barriers for internationalization • Intercultural challenges of internationalization

Figure 2: Overview of Challenges and Opportunities in the post-COVID era

Opportunities have primarily emerged in relation to the internationalization of HEIs through student mobility. Sociocultural opportunities are an essential part of this. For example, virtual international study abroad programs create new opportunities to build an international network even after the pandemic and offer alternatives to the traditional lecture format (Woicolesco et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the SLR has shown that in terms of challenges, the proportion of sociocultural barriers is greatest in the post pandemic situation. Language barriers or students' sociocultural backgrounds create an imbalance, as access to potential resources for internationalization, for example, is not always available (Bathilla et al., 2022). This must be explicitly considered in the development of post-pandemic technological advances regarding student mobility. Political opportunities form the second pillar in the weighting of the arguments identified regarding internationalization. The opportunities can be divided between decisions at the government level and at HEIs. A general political internationalization strategy to promote diversity and higher education is recognized as essential within the SLR framework. Regarding the challenges, the political aspects also constitute the second-largest line of argumentation. In many cases, there is not enough financial support for the expansion of virtualization (Moeller, 2025). Irrespective of digitalization strategies, the pandemic still requires rethinking in many places and a focus on internationalization strategies that were previously suppressed by COVID regulations. The economic aspects were identified as the opportunities and challenges exerting the least impact. Opportunities were identified within the digital transformations and the continuous expansion of technologies, including the promotion of virtualized teaching as part of student mobility (Sun et al., 2022).

DISCUSSION

The analysis draws on economic, sociocultural, and political aspects. In certain instances, delineating clear boundaries between these categories can be challenging, a topic that is discussed in depth.

The Economic Opportunities and Challenges of the Internationalization of HEIs

Opportunities and challenges identified in the SLR are systematically organized within the matrix, encompassing economic, sociocultural, and political dimensions. Distinguishing precise boundaries between these categories is inherently challenging, a methodological issue addressed in detail in the following discussion.

Tech-Enabled Internationalization

The SLR has shown that investment in the digital transformation of student mobility within the framework of HEIs can be considered important in terms of economic opportunities. The literature indicates that an expansion of digital infrastructure following the pandemic is anticipated, as formats such as “virtual mobility” are expected to become increasingly prevalent (Minaeva & Taradina, 2022). Digitized processes such as “internationalization at home (IaH)” Lazareva et al., 2022, p.11) can promote students’ digital skills and thus promote digitization in internationalization (Lazareva et al., 2022, p.11). This is why analyzing investments in digital providers for the realization of online activities is important to keep higher education on track (Roshid & Ibna Seraj, 2023). Investing in the digital process of transforming student mobility into HEIs is a key aspect of economic opportunities. HEIs should take advantage of the opportunities offered by digitalization in their strategic positioning. Digitalization represents not only an economic opportunity but can also be considered a sociocultural opportunity insofar as technological advancements have the potential to enrich culture and foster a sense of community among students.

Financial Support

The SLR also highlights an opportunity related to the interplay between HEI infrastructure and financial resources. Enhancing the quality of student services and support is essential to facilitate growth in the inflow of international students. An investment beyond academic support could be helpful in increasing internationalization (Zhang & Zhu, 2022). In general, interactive teaching should also involve investment in virtual technology. It should not only be about expanding online classes but also about investing in materials and teaching that is both digital and face-to-face (Ashida & Ishizaka, 2022). The literature suggests that the financial investment of HEIs in the structures and processes of incoming international students is sensible. This economic advantage also creates social and cultural opportunities for students, as investing in services creates a positive experience for them. This economic advantage also generates sociocultural opportunities for students, as investment in services contributes to a positive student experience.

Access and Affordability in International Higher Education

A special form of funding is scholarships for international students, which represent a financial change from the students' point of view, which means that international exchanges are more likely to be undertaken. In relation to student exchanges, the term 'international academic tourism' (Amaro et al., 2024, p. 2) is often used. These can also have a positive and sustainable impact on your destination. For example, locations with seasonality are equalized by the increased number of students. HEIs should also invest in sustainable campuses and local projects. This would allow the phenomenon to be steered in a more sustainable direction, which would have a positive impact on the region (Amaro et al., 2024). In connection with sustainable investments, scholarships also play a role in promoting "academic tourism" (Amaro et al., 2024, p. 2). This opportunity therefore primarily plays a role in the promotion of students, as they benefit from investments in sustainable structures. To further promote incoming students in the sense of "academic tourism" (Amaro et al., 2024, p. 2), reduced prices could also be created in residential units. Such financial support can also be interpreted in a political context, since financial assistance is often not decided at the level of HEIs but rather at the level of the destination for an international stay abroad. Depending on the region and country, there are divergent views and regulations regarding scholarships. The benefits of scholarships should therefore be carefully considered and evaluated with attention to regional contexts.

Technological

Regarding the influence of technology, the digital transformation within the post-COVID era, associated with increasing online offerings, among other things, emerged as part of economic opportunities.

Poor technical prerequisites for students' ability to realize virtual learning are an essential component of external effects (Bathilla et al., 2022). Students have different ways of accessing the internet, so conditions vary globally. This assumption of challenges from a student perspective is confirmed several times in the literature. For instance, a poor connection within a student survey on the effects of online teaching is presented as a challenge (Orsini-Jones, 2023). Similarly, the quality of online services is influenced by a stable internet connection (Tsymbal & Kalenyuk, 2023). At the university level, the expansion of the technological infrastructure is also a challenge of our time (Minaeva & Taradina, 2022). As with the digitization process, investment in new technologies can also be considered to create new opportunities for students to stay abroad, for example, digital learning or blended learning concepts. This is a learning concept, where virtual classes are combined with sessions in person. This can reduce duration and thus also costs and other factors for students. In terms of sociocultural impacts, this can be viewed as a secondary effect.

Market Barriers

In addition to technical risks in implementing online teaching, competition among HEIs also plays a decisive role in the internationalization of incoming students. Due to the pandemic, there has been an increase in competitive behavior between worldwide HEIs regarding the networks and partnerships of students (Skokauskas et al., 2023). In view of this, the focus is also on the internationalization of the curriculum, which also places a significant emphasis on sustainability (Skokauskas et al., 2023). The processes are associated with costs due to their implementation, which means that these factors can be described as economic. From the HEI's perspective, internationalization should be supported after the pandemic to increase student mobility factors again (Butum et al., 2022). Market barriers also create a political challenge, as governments in different countries of origin must focus on reimagining internationalization strategies.

Financial Barriers

Another factor to be considered among the economic challenges of the post-COVID era is the financial situation from the university and student perspectives. High tuition fees, which play a significant role in the realization of international stay, are an essential component of this (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2025). It is assumed that students who come from a financially strong family are more likely to benefit positively from internationalization (Yang & Li, 2024). 'Privileged' students are more likely to have the opportunity to take advantage of student exchange programs (Wu et al., 2022). The pandemic has led to a deterioration in the quality of lessons. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of technical equipment used to monitor examination performance given that many classes have moved online (Wang & Sun, 2022). This lack of equipment can in turn be seen as an economic challenge, as financial effects have played a role.

In the context of economic impact, the SLR can be used to identify opportunities, especially in the context of digital transformation, using virtual teaching in the post-COVID era. However, it should be borne in mind that technical conditions can sometimes lead to restrictions in implementation. Financial restrictions on students could advance the internationalization of HEIs through digital teaching options, as access can be created.

The Political Opportunities and Challenges of the Internationalization of HEIs

Political opportunities can be categorized from two perspectives: those perceived by students and those reflected in HEIs' strategic measures for the internationalization process. Challenges can be divided into three further elements. On the one hand, political stability and its effects, as well as regulations, nevertheless have an impact on the current situation due to the pandemic. In contrast, there is a focus on fostering political collaboration.

Governmental Political Strategies

The SLR indicates that internationalization is positively influenced by political decisions at the governmental level. This also includes investment in internationalization, which could improve the quality of stay for international students (Bhatara & Khanna, 2024). In this context, it is important to provide international students after the pandemic with legal security during their stay by introducing legislation to support this (Roshid & Ibna Seraj, 2023). Another aspect is that the diversity of international students is important to prevent discrimination against students during their stay. This aspect is important from a political point of view, as the students not only have a positive economic effect but can also be seen as contributing to integration in the society of the respective country (Welch, 2022).

An illustrative example from the European Union is the Erasmus program, which establishes a political framework of cross-national decisions designed to facilitate and encourage student mobility. The Erasmus+ exchange and teacher exchanges also help with internationalization, as they facilitate exchanges between countries. With regard to the post-COVID era, decisions on virtual stay abroad could also help to promote internationalization (Kafarski & Kazak, 2022). Strategic decisions made by the government also have a financial impact on students and higher education institutions, as additional funding can increase interest in internationalization.

HEIS Political Strategies

In addition to the political decisions of governments, politics within the decisions of higher education institutions are also important to mention. In the context of the SLR, these aspects made up most of the political opportunities. A specific element of such political strategies involves creating dedicated campuses to accommodate international students. This is a new approach following the COVID-19 pandemic (Legusov et al., 2022). HEIs should also pay particular attention to the aspect of diversity when discussing opportunities within the post-COVID era. The important thing is not to neglect the aspect of diversity in online teaching (Lee & Mao, 2025). Within the opportunities, the aspect of diversity must therefore be considered on many levels. There is a high demand for technological innovation within higher education. It is therefore necessary for institutions to translate this into their university policy decisions (Tsymbal & Kalenyuk, 2023). In addition, not only do curricula have to adapt to digitalization to create 'flexibility' (Ou et al., 2024), but the training of staff must also be able to interact with the new methods of the post-COVID era (Ou et al., 2024). It is shown that this represents a significant opportunity in the development of the political opportunities of the post-COVID era for HEIs and their internationalization strategies. The economic implications of political and strategic planning for HEIs should be acknowledged, as internationalization strategies may entail projects that require substantial financial resources.

External and Political Instability

Beyond structured political factors, political instability may also have a considerable impact. The situation at the destination is essentially decisive for the international strategy (Minaeva & Taradina, 2022). A lack of financial support can also be an attribution to political instability apart from the consequences of the pandemic (Moeller, 2025). Political instability can also lead to economic instability, which likewise influences internationalization. In politically unstable countries, it may be challenging for students to secure opportunities for international stay abroad programs either due to safety considerations or due to a lack of visa availability.

Post-Pandemic Strategies and Policies

Regarding the challenges after the pandemic, the effects of pandemic regulations continue to influence the internationalization of student mobility. In the context of pandemic regulations, online offerings had to be expanded quickly, but some of them were not directly designed for international students. Online offerings continue to be used, but the consideration of international “needs” (Qu & Song, 2024, p.173) should also be integrated. According to Qu & Song (2024), it is important to consider the involvement of international students when designing future online teaching. The assumptions are supported by Fedorchenko et al. (2024) those who suggest that the main challenges in the post-COVID era are safety regulations and the resulting online teaching. A study among international undergraduate students has shown that some courses should not be replaced by traditional teaching in the post-COVID era (Fedorchenko et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in the field of teaching, where personal interaction is a key component of the profession.

It is evident that the implementation of regulations related to COVID-19 has influenced the internationalization of student mobility and continues to affect the postpandemic era of digital teaching.

Political Collaboration Barriers

Political collaborations by governmental decisions have resulted in a further clustering of political challenges. These factors encompass all aspects of the post-COVID era related to cooperation between the home universities and the target destination. A lack of satisfaction with the performance of university support staff was observed. The authors emphasize that satisfaction with service quality plays a critical role in the post-COVID era of internationalization (Barrios-Ipenza et al., 2024).

The Sociocultural Opportunities and Challenges of the Internationalization of HEIs

In addressing the research question, subcategories have been identified within the framework of sociocultural opportunities and challenges. Overall,

sociocultural factors constitute the predominant dimension of the results. Findings from the SLR were largely situated within this category, given that numerous studies surveyed students and staff at HEIs to examine their experiences and perceptions of internationalization processes. As outlined in the methodological approach, research not primarily scientific was excluded from the SLR. Consequently, personal experiences and anecdotal accounts are not considered in the analysis of self-perception.

Virtualization

Short-term virtual mobility programs are argued to foster both personal and professional development among mobility students by strengthening their academic learning, cultural awareness, and digital literacy, thereby preparing them for future labor market demands (Sin Soo et al., 2024, p.868). Such programs range from a few days to several months, with a maximum duration of 3 months (Sin Soo et al., 2024, p. 862).

A key opportunity lies in the virtualization of HEI digitalization, particularly in the context of post-COVID internationalization. The process of virtualization is primarily a result of the strategies adopted during the pandemic, which are now leading to a new development of internationalization (Woicolesco et al., 2022). It is assumed that the skills of students can be expanded using digitalized processes in the context of internationalization at HEIs (Lazareva et al., 2022). According to Zhang & Zhu (2022), virtual teaching can be described as a new trend in education regarding the international process of HEIs. Through virtual opportunities, international students can be networked, and an exchange can be created (Zhang & Zhu, 2022). Virtual student mobility creates the opportunity to promote international exchange without a physical presence (Abdullah & Singh, 2022, p. 88). Collaborative technologies are recognized as tools that support the creation of virtual teams among international students, helping higher education institutions mitigate obstacles to international mobility and exchanges. (Miranda & Chamorro-Mera, 2024). The processes of digitization and virtualization have already exerted a significant influence on the economic and political domains, for example, the investigation of new technologies.

Student-Centered Internationalization

This category is mainly concerned with the intercultural development potential and internationalization of HEIs, even independently of virtual formats in the post-COVID era. (Sun et al., 2022) speak of transnational education (TNE) in the context of the post-COVID era. In contrast to De Wit et al. (2025), the introductory definition of student mobility, the TNE is primarily designed for use in virtual formats. The central point is that education is delivered through various global HEIs, both virtually and on-site. TNE is assumed to provide opportunities to enhance intercultural communication among students and to strengthen their social competencies through exposure to different cultural contexts. Divisiveness is also promoted, and students' perspectives on situations and processes are

changed and scrutinized (Sun et al., 2022). Charoensap-Kelly and Punyanunt-Carter (2022) have developed suggestions that should be considered for counseling international students at HEIs within the post-COVID era. It should be emphasized that topics such as diversity or inclusion should also be addressed to achieve an exchange on these topics (Charoensap-Kelly & Punyanunt-Carter, 2023). These matters additionally give rise to political challenges that must be addressed. Furthermore, the introduction of interactive activities and structured opportunities for student interaction is recommended to promote networking beyond formal classroom settings. (Charoensap-Kelly & Punyanunt-Carter, 2023). These ideas reflect measures that promote the sociocultural skills of the students and support the internationalization process of the HEIs. It was established during the SLR that many participants in the internationalization of HEIs consider a local presence to be necessary. It is therefore not limited exclusively to virtualization (Xu et al., 2023). It is assumed that an exchange is perceived as important in both virtual and physical presence (Einfalt, 2024).

Barriers for Internationalization

Within the scope of sociocultural opportunities, challenges in the post-COVID era also emerge, as outlined below. Barriers of various kinds play a decisive role here. A further subcategory is the Intercultural Challenges of Internationalization. These barriers are associated with students' sociocultural and demographic characteristics, which play a significant role in the transformations observed in the post-COVID era. These challenges are related to virtual models of internationalization and on-site presentation formats.

The SLR has revealed that there may be language difficulties that affect the exchange of HEIs. As a result, students have difficulty communicating linguistically when the English proficiency levels are very different (Lazareva et al., 2022). Another barrier that has emerged in the post-COVID era is the lack of participation in virtual sessions (Bathilla et al., 2022). This is mainly due to a lack of interactive exchange opportunities during the transfer of knowledge in digital form (Bathilla et al., 2022). A major challenge for students is also virtual participation due to poor or unstable internet, as not every region enables access to high-speed internet (Ashida & Ishizaka, 2022). Infrastructural access can limit the possibility of internet use. In this context, additional challenges affecting virtual mobility include international time zones (Keshishi et al., 2023). Virtual stay abroad must be organized across time zones, which can make participation more difficult. Virtual formats can also entail high costs (Sin Soo et al., 2024). Consequently, elevated costs also constitute an economic aspect of this matter.

Intercultural Challenges of Internationalization

The pandemic has also brought intercultural challenges that have affected students. On the one hand, students do not always come from a socially strong background that has the financial means to spend time abroad. Regardless of the format, whether virtual or in person, as outlined by Wu et al. in 2022.

Financial resources, therefore, also play a decisive role in terms of sociocultural background. Stereotypical prejudices to which students can be exposed pose a further challenge (Legusov et al., 2022). Many cultures come together, which can lead to sociocultural discrepancies that can have a negative impact on the students' stay. The different views can also lead to problems when working together due to the cultural background (Miranda & Chamorro-Mera, 2024). Orsini-Jones (2023) describes a total of ten challenges in the study conducted, which can be categorized primarily in terms of sociocultural factors and relate to the implementation of digital teaching.

While some students may be reluctant to engage in online teaching, many are impacted by their domestic environment. Additionally, virtual lessons for students and teachers who fear that online teaching could lead to social isolation (Orsini-Jones, 2023).

In summary, sociocultural opportunities and challenges are an essential part of the internationalization of HEIs in the post-COVID era. When reviewing the literature, these factors were examined most frequently, and their relevance was demonstrated. The studies focus primarily on the process and effects of digitalization. Prior to the advent of the pandemic, digital innovation, particularly in the domain of hybrid learning, did not constitute a primary focus area.

In the post pandemic era, the sociocultural consequences of the virus are likely to be significant. This is mainly due to cultural discrepancies and barriers caused by students' inadequate technology. Above all, the focus is increasingly on supporting students through scholarships. It should be noted that many financial resources have been lost due to the pandemic, which means that in many places, less can be invested in internationalization and digitization. Within the post-COVID era, there has also been a steady increase in competitive pressure on HEIs to increase their share of international students. It can be said that many opportunities and challenges affect several factors and are not exclusively influenced by economic or political decisions. For example, research has shown that sociocultural factors, such as the environment from which a student comes, are also linked to economic factors such as the monetary situation. Therefore, it can be said that a clear distinction cannot always be made based on the pillars, as some factors influence each other, such as costs and social impacts, or political stability on the sociocultural behavior of students.

The data analysis serves primarily as an orientation toward potential opportunities and risks, which should be investigated in greater depth in subsequent research to verify their relevance. In future studies, additional databases could be utilized to validate or complement the currently identified opportunities and challenges. Considering the overall limitations, the database could be expanded to include further sources. The inclusion of non-English language databases should also be considered to achieve more comprehensive data collection. Moreover, regional limitations could be addressed by conducting analyses broken down by specific regions, such as Europe or Asia, which would allow for a more differentiated understanding of opportunities and challenges in student mobility.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the opportunities and challenges encountered by international students in the post-COVID era, with a particular focus on identifying the measures that HEIs should prioritize. The research questions addressed in the study were as follows:

- What opportunities and challenges do the internationalization efforts of HEIs – especially in the post-COVID era – yield for international students?
- What measures do HEIs focus on in student mobility in the context of internationalization in the post-COVID era?

As part of the SLR, a matrix according to Webster and Watson (2002) was created showing the key opportunities and challenges based on the current trends of student mobility according to Hong et al. (2025). Regarding the first research question, the categories can essentially be divided into economic, political, and sociocultural opportunities and challenges. Sociocultural opportunities have demonstrated the helpfulness of strengthening virtualization and expanding digitization in line with current internationalization trends. Furthermore, to promote internationalization, students should be encouraged to network more through social interaction. From a political perspective, strategic internationalization initiatives in HEIs have the potential to positively shape the postpandemic internationalization process. Furthermore, the strategies employed by the HEIs themselves also play a pivotal role in the creation of superior positioning. Regarding the economic opportunities presented by internationalization, access to higher education can be cited as an example. This is evidenced by the increasing number of international students who are granted scholarships, thus facilitating their participation in higher education. Furthermore, advancements in infrastructure have been demonstrated to play a pivotal role in the creation of economic opportunities. In the context of challenges, various aspects can be mentioned, including external factors such as globalization, which can also have negative economic effects, or financial challenges for both HEIs and students. Additionally, an escalating competitive market environment can be discerned, a development that has the potential to result in a strengthening of the positioning of HEIs.

The SLR has shown that the focus of current internationalization is primarily on the sociocultural opportunities and challenges that should be considered in the internationalization strategy of HEIs. In particular, the subdivision based on economic, sociocultural, and political opportunities and challenges represents a unique feature compared to previous studies. This allows the opportunities and challenges to be analyzed and identified more concretely through their representation in a matrix.

A key finding of this research was that while virtualization has a strong impact on current student mobility, traditional teaching methods should not be completely abolished to consider the negative impact of sociocultural factors, for

example, desocialization, intercultural exchange or networking. It is important to note the issue of isolation and a lack of interaction between students in this context. This finding should be considered when formulating internationalization strategies. It was also found that the post-COVID era was strongly influenced by political decisions, such as the country's stability and infrastructure, as well as the strategy within the internationalization strategy. The study showed that the stability of the destination country and the structures in place contribute to students' decisions to spend a semester abroad. Regarding the recommendations for HEIs, the results can be divided into short-term and long-term recommendations for the period from 2025 to 2030. In this context, targets for 2027 are regarded as short-term strategies, while long-term aspirations can be regarded as targets for 2030. The objectives have been subdivided, as some strategies require comprehensive planning.

Regarding short-term recommendations, HEIs should give greater priority to supporting international students by consulting services and scholarships to increase the proportion of international students. In concrete terms, this could mean extending the International Office's office hours and expanding the communication channels. Social media can thus be used for exchange among staff and international students. Regarding scholarships, regional funding can be targeted, for example, by individual faculties using financial resources to promote internationalization. This goal should be pursued, as the study has shown that sociocultural factors in particular play a significant role in the post-COVID era. For instance, networking is playing an essential role in the current situation. Networking can take place within the framework of local meetings, small events that take place at the beginning and end of the semester. The implementation process is straightforward, and students already enrolled as degree-seeking at HEIs can provide support within the framework of the network. One possible form of networking could be summer and winter schools designed using hybrid formats. This type of short-term stay for students makes it possible to spend time abroad when, for example, longer stays are not possible. They create opportunities to make contacts and expand your network. The organization of networking meetings or events fosters a sense of connection to HEIs and promotes communication among students, who can also assist each other with social challenges. It is vital that the meetings are supported by staff from an international office, for example, to provide a framework for the meetings. The events should be designed to facilitate exchange between students and provide staff with the opportunity to ask questions about their personal student mobility. The literature frequently refers to social isolation during the pandemic and the psychological consequences for students as background information (Orsini-Jones, 2023). Compared to pre-pandemic studies, the current focus is primarily understood to be on social support for students. During the pandemic, the focus was primarily on distance learning methods for international student mobility. These approaches could increase the proportion of international students and thus reduce missing student numbers through satisfaction with the support provided to international students during their stay. It is imperative that future research delves deeper into the potential of digitization and utilizes a broader range of studies from multiple

databases. In addition, based on the focus of virtualization, as a long-term objective recommendation, an additional investment in the technologization of HEIs can be made to keep up with current developments in virtualization, considering conventional presence replacements. Exploration of the topic of blended learning and other hybrid models within the context of university research, with reference to student mobility, is recommended. Virtualization should always be seen as a supplement to physical learning, not a replacement for it. Student support systems can also help by providing guidance during your studies abroad. More opportunities for international students to connect should be created to revive social interactions after COVID-19 and establish connections to regions and HEIs. HEIs should prioritize staff training to ensure preparedness for cultural differences and the ability to manage them effectively, particularly in the context of digital teaching methods. Furthermore, all processes related to student mobility should be digitized.

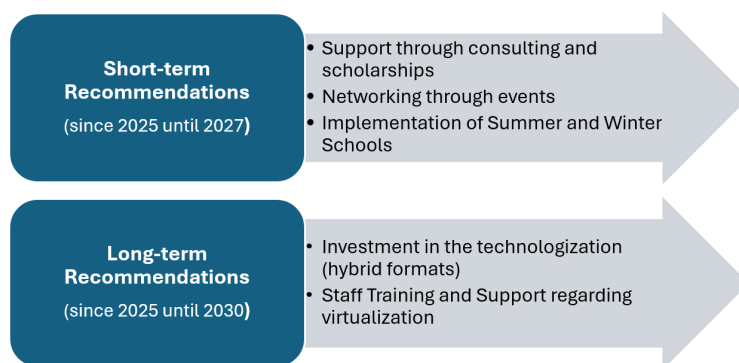


Figure 3: Recommendations for HEIs 2025-2030

In conclusion, the reconfiguration of internationalization in higher education is shaped by economic, sociocultural, and political opportunities, as well as by changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study offers a comprehensive and contemporary overview of the literature. Based on the matrix, individual subcategories were developed, enabling HEIs to tailor internationalization strategies. The subdivision of categories into subcategories provides a flexible framework for analytical purposes.

This study focuses on international students, so any further study should also limit the effects on, for example, non-degree seeking students or short-term mobility. Additional databases, such as Scopus, could be considered in the literature review to strengthen the findings. In a further step, semistructured interviews could be conducted with students as part of a case study to identify motivational factors for studying at HEIs. Complementing the qualitative research, incorporating quantitative methods could strengthen the overall significance of the findings by adopting a mixed-methods approach.

HEIs should continuously adapt their internationalization strategy to global changes and simplify the process of student mobility for international students by maintaining a presence in the competitive international market and providing personal support during the semester abroad as well as during the preparation and follow-up phases. An increase in the overall number of students can be achieved only through sustainable support. The findings of the study indicate that opportunities and challenges can be organized into economic, sociocultural, and political classifications, with opportunities for internationalization being particularly prominent in the post-COVID era. The provision of short-term and long-term recommendations has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy for the prevention of developments and the creation of strategic measures that higher education institutions (HEIs) should utilize.

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