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## Education-to-Career Pathways of International Students in India

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**ABSTRACT:** *India's expanding higher education sector is increasingly attracting international students. However, their education-to-career pathways remain underexplored. This study examines the influence of course selection, country of origin, gender, language proficiency, and sociocultural background on the mobility experiences, sense of belonging, and employability outcomes of international students in India. It draws on in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 students from diverse disciplines across three universities in Delhi, Pune, and Bengaluru. The research employs thematic analysis within a two-step framework of migration and acculturation/belonging. The findings reveal that while institutional expansion offers greater access, early barriers, including linguistic and cultural adjustments, limited employment rights, and uneven institutional support, hinder career integration. Informal networks, faculty mentorship, and culturally responsive pedagogies emerge as key mediators of adaptation, influencing decisions regarding settlement, return, or onward migration. Legislative contexts, ranging from visa regulations to the recognition of foreign qualifications, significantly impact employability trajectories, with restrictive frameworks limiting long-term integration. The study proposes operationalizing sustainability-oriented internationalization policies through equitable support systems, capacity-building for institutions, and ethical engagement with student communities, thereby enhancing retention, career preparedness, and mutually beneficial global partnerships. By examining the under researched South–South mobility corridor, this study challenges the Western-centric dominance of*

*migration literature, offering a critical blueprint for emerging education hubs in the Global South aiming to balance recruitment targets with sustainable career integration.*

**Keywords:** Acculturation, belonging, education-to-career transitions, employability, India, international students, mobility

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## INTRODUCTION

India's emergence as a regional higher education hub reflects a strategic shift in its internationalization policy, supported by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and increasing cross-border academic collaborations. Historically known as a source country for outbound mobility, with over 7.6 lakh Indian students studying abroad in 2024 (TOI Education, 2025), India is now witnessing a significant rise in inbound international students (Association of Indian Universities, 2024). The post-pandemic reality further accelerates this shift. Deepening global inequalities have made traditional Western destinations less accessible to Global South students, prompting a redirection toward regional hubs (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). This dual mobility trend is a testament to India's growing participation in global educational exchanges and its strategic efforts to improve access to education and enhance employability in a highly interconnected world. This decentralization of international education is corroborated by Hou and Du (2022), whose network analysis of global mobility illustrates a definitive structural shift from a unipolar Western-centric model to a multipolar landscape dominated by emerging regional hubs. Such strategic reorientation aligns with broader trends in the Global South, where countries are increasingly transitioning from mere exporters of students to active competitors in the international higher education market by leveraging regional affinities and cost-effective knowledge economies (Thondhlana et al., 2021).

The recent steps taken by the country signal this strategic reorientation. The Indian Institutes of Technology and other universities have signed agreements with globally ranked universities, such as Stanford University and Oxford, to create programs in artificial intelligence, digital healthcare, and climate resilience. These partnerships have increased graduate employability, with joint and dual-degree programs reported to have raised employment rates by 25 percent in high-

demand sectors (Chauhan, 2025). This progress reflects India's transformative higher education system. It is increasingly integrated into a global network centered on skill mobility and innovation, rather than operating solely as an isolated national learning system.

However, there are some problems that international students must encounter while studying in India and during their transition from education to career. Surveys conducted globally suggest that employability is the main reason for international mobility. As Choudaha (2017) conceptualizes in his widely cited analysis of global mobility trends, modern international student flows are no longer driven solely by academic prestige; instead, they are overwhelmingly dictated by the 'value-for-money' and poststudy employment prospects offered by host destinations. For example, 77% of Indian students who go abroad do so to improve their career prospects and access poststudy work opportunities (Education Desk, 2025). On the other hand, international students in India often struggle with language proficiency, recognition of their foreign qualifications and limited access to formal employment networks. These differences reveal that there is an uneven internationalization landscape, where institutional and legislative contexts can significantly influence mobility experiences and career outcomes. This reflects a common paradox within emerging regional hubs; as Lee and Sehoole (2015) observe in their parallel study of South-South mobility, while emerging economies successfully attract regional students through policy ambitions and affordability, they frequently lack the mature structural and legislative frameworks necessary for seamless socioeconomic integration.

The Indian higher education system is developing in many ways and is becoming more diverse. There is a need to navigate this landscape for anyone seeking education. Challenges exist for international students because of linguistic diversity and unevenly distributed institutional support networks. India is home to more than 48,000 international students mostly coming from South Asia, Africa, and East Asia (Institute of International Education, 2025). However, uneven geographical distribution and lack of post-study work opportunities continue to hinder long-term integration. These problems correspond with those identified by Ranabahu and De Silva (2024), who in their study pinpointed acculturation stress, perceived discrimination, and limited host country engagement as major obstacles to international students' adaptation in higher education contexts worldwide.

Given this new global context, understanding the pathways from education to careers for international students in India requires recognizing the interplay among individual agency, institutional practices, and policy structures. To analyze these complex trajectories, this study proposes a unified analytical framework linking Berry's (1997) acculturation model, Putnam's (2000) social capital theory, and Carling and Schewel's (2018) two-step migration framework. Rather than treating these theories in parallel, this study argues that they operate interdependently: social capital (informal networks and mentorship) acts as the crucial meso-level bridge that enables students to convert micro-level sociocultural acculturation into the macro-level systemic access required to realize two-step migration aspirations. Together, this integrated lens sheds light

on the complicated mechanisms through which international students navigate structural barriers to shape their career futures. While substantial mobility research focuses on traditional Western destinations, India remains underexplored as a host country (Tewari et al., 2024). Because the literature predominantly treats India as a source country, the lived experiences, institutional interactions, and career pathways of its incoming international students remain largely unknown. Filling this gap is essential for India, which is committed to attracting 200,000 international students by 2030 under its 'Study in India' program (Ministry of Education, 2024).

This research closes the gaps in the literature by exploring the influence of factors such as course selection, country of origin, gender, and language on the education-to-career trajectories of international students in Indian universities. More importantly, it looks into how institutional settings, informal networks, and legislation shape the outcomes of employability, decisions about settling down or returning, and feelings of belonging. This study, through qualitative narratives from universities in Delhi, Pune, and Bengaluru, aims to map out the interaction of individual aspirations and systemic structures in determining career futures. This research also places internationalization in higher education's ethical and sustainability dimensions. The deeper India goes into global partnerships, the more necessary culturally responsive and inclusive frameworks become. Chauhan (2025) points out that university collaboration with global institutions has greatly improved graduate employability and industry relevance; however, little has been done to show how these partnerships support culturally diverse learners. Therefore, sustainability-focused internationalization means creating fair support systems that acknowledge differences in students' sociocultural and occupational contexts while ensuring their long-term integration.

Given these considerations, the following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. How do demographic, sociocultural, and academic factors influence the education-to-career transitions of international students in India?
2. What role do institutional frameworks and legislative policies play in shaping employability outcomes and migration decisions?
3. In what ways do informal networks, mentorship, and a sense of belonging mediate students' adaptation and long-term integration?

In addressing these questions, the study makes several contributions. Theoretically, it extends two-step migration and acculturation frameworks to the Indian context, demonstrating how mobility aspirations and adjustment processes unfold in a nontraditional study destination. Empirically, it provides grounded insights into how international students experience inclusion and exclusion within India's rapidly transforming higher education system. Practically, it offers recommendations for policymakers and institutions seeking to strengthen internationalization through equitable support, employability-focused design, and ethical engagement with student communities. Ultimately, this investigation argues that India's potential as a global education hub lies not only in expanding access but also in ensuring sustainable, inclusive pathways that bridge education and employment. A culturally responsive, ethically informed, and sustainability-

oriented approach to internationalization can reposition India from a “sending” to a “circulating” knowledge economy, one that fosters mutual growth, reciprocity, and global citizenship.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As a result of globalization, policy reforms, and changes in student mobility patterns, the internationalization of higher education has fundamentally changed in the last ten years. Although the major traditional destination countries, e.g., the US, the UK, and Australia, are still leading, a few new regional hubs, such as India, China, and the Middle East, are becoming attractive academic destinations (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2024).

This review of the literature combines the research into the three thematic strands that are relevant to the present study:

- global patterns of international student mobility and education-to-career transitions,
- institutional and legislative contexts influencing employability outcomes, and
- the role of social networks, mentorship, and acculturation in shaping adaptation and belonging.

It concludes by identifying unresolved gaps in the literature and outlining the contributions of the current study.

### **Global Patterns of International Student Mobility and Career Transitions**

International student mobility has become a defining feature of global higher education. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2025), the number of international students worldwide surpassed 6.9 million in 2024 and is projected to reach 9 million by 2030. This expansion has been driven by the dual narrative of global knowledge exchange and the search for enhanced career prospects. The international mobility landscape, however, has begun to diversify, with a marked shift from traditional Western destinations to emerging destinations such as India, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates (ICEF Monitor, 2025). Hernández-Torrano et al. (2024) identify a broadening of “academic geographies,” where students from the Global South increasingly consider regional alternatives that offer both linguistic familiarity and affordable tuition.

India’s positioning within this global trajectory is particularly noteworthy. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and subsequent reforms have reframed Indian higher education as a global platform for knowledge sharing, promoting cross-border student exchange, and inviting foreign institutions to establish campuses within the country. Beyond cost advantages, Indian universities are increasingly offering English-language programs and establishing dual-degree partnerships with institutions in the United States, Australia, and Europe. This makes India a unique South–South hub where transnational flows of students from Africa and Asia converge (Bajia & Nagda, 2025). Theoretically,

this reflects the evolving rationales of internationalization described by Knight (2021), where national policies increasingly pivot from mere cultural exchange to strategic ‘knowledge diplomacy’ and capacity building within the global knowledge economy.

Within these evolving flows, employability emerges as a central determinant of student choice. According to AACSB’s (2025) global report, over 80% of international students cite career advancement as their primary motivation for studying abroad. Similar findings are observed in studies of Indian student mobility, where students pursue international education to enhance global competencies and professional recognition (Chankseliani et al., 2025). However, while returnee employability is well documented in OECD contexts, scholarship on postgraduation outcomes for international students in India remains underdeveloped. Recent studies highlight that for non-Western destinations, employability is less about credential signaling and more about overcoming structural ‘othering’ in local labor markets (Uchukanokkul & Zaveri, 2025).

The education-to-career transition framework conceptualizes how students leverage their academic experiences in job market participation. Wang et al. (2025) argue that international higher education enhances employability not only through credential acquisition but also through cross-cultural competencies, adaptability, and global networking skills. These “soft currencies” are increasingly valued in global labor markets (Wang et al., 2025). However, as emerging host contexts such as India lack structured poststudy work policies and industry linkages, international students often face underemployment and limited access to formal job markets (Bajia & Nagda, 2025). This tension between academic opportunity and career constraints forms a core research concern in understanding education-to-career trajectories in India.

### **Institutional and Legislative Contexts and Employability Outcomes**

Institutional and legislative frameworks profoundly shape international student experience. Comparative research highlights how state policy, visa regulations, and labor laws determine access to both part-time and poststudy employment (Hari & Wang-Dufil, 2023). The “two-step migration” model, a policy mechanism allowing international students to transition from study to work status, has become a central feature of migration systems in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (Crossman et al., 2020; Hawthorne, 2010). This approach links academic achievement with pathways to permanent residency, thereby aligning education policy with national labor market needs (Hari & Wang-Dufil, 2023).

While highly effective in Western contexts, the absence of equivalent mechanisms in India reveals key institutional gaps. India’s current internationalization policies emphasize academic collaboration rather than labor integration. The NEP 2020, while encouraging partnerships and research exchange, offers no structured poststudy visa category. This limits students’ opportunities to apply their education in local job markets, resulting in increased

return or onward migration, a dynamic consistent with Carling and Schewel's (2018) notion of "blocked aspirations" within the two-step migration theory.

Even within academic institutions, support for employability remains uneven. Wang et al. (2025) and the Higher Education Policy Institute (Nicol, 2025) emphasize that structured career services and tailored job readiness programs are crucial for the success of international graduates. However, many universities in the Global South lack institutionalized support for transition planning. The result is an overreliance on informal mentoring arrangements, which, while valuable, cannot substitute for systematic policy frameworks that link education and employment. As Gribble et al. (2017) argue, when universities treat international student employability merely as a peripheral add-on rather than integrating it into the core curriculum and host-community engagement, graduates inevitably face severe friction when transitioning into the formal labor market.

Institutional research further underscores the influence of disciplinary focus and regional variation on shaping outcomes. For example, social science and arts graduates face higher unemployment rates than their STEM peers across both Western and Asian contexts (Wang et al., 2025). In the Indian context, universities in metropolitan centers, such as Delhi and Bengaluru, offer better internship and networking prospects than institutions in Tier-2 cities. Thus, employability is not uniformly distributed but mediated by geography, institutional capacity, and labor market exposure.

### **Social Networks, Mentorship, and Acculturation in Belonging**

Beyond structural factors, individual adaptation and social integration are critical in determining the success and sense of belonging of international students. Ranabahu and De Silva (2024) emphasize that adaptation is an ongoing process shaped by the interplay of cultural familiarity, institutional support, and peer engagement. Theories of acculturation, beginning with Berry (1997), remain central in conceptualizing how international students negotiate cultural identities and psychological well-being. In this framework, integration, defined as maintaining one's heritage culture while engaging with the host community, emerges as the most adaptive strategy.

Recent scholarship reaffirms the link between belonging, mental well-being, and academic persistence (Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024). According to Wu et al. (2025), a strong sense of belonging has a direct and positive impact on life satisfaction and academic success. Researchers found that students who actively engaged with host institutions and participated in cultural or mentorship programs reported lower acculturative stress and higher career clarity after graduation. Mentorship has been widely recognized as a crucial mediator in these processes. The International Mentoring Programme at HSE University (2025) and similar initiatives at American and Australian universities demonstrate how structured mentoring relationships between faculty, alumni, and students enhance self-efficacy and professional readiness. Studies from the University of Southern California (2025) find that alum mentorship contributes to more precise career trajectories and expanded professional networks for international students. Such

social capital provides not only emotional support but also concrete career guidance and access to job opportunities (University of Southern California, 2025). However, the availability of formal mentoring programs in Indian universities remains limited. Instead, international students rely primarily on informal peer and faculty relationships. This reliance on informal networks can be both enabling and exclusionary, facilitating adaptation when supportive peers are available but limiting opportunities when cultural bias or language barriers exist. These findings align with Tewari et al.'s (2024) argument that belonging on Indian campuses is often mediated by disciplinary communities rather than institutional policies. Bilecen and Lubbers (2021) highlight that in the absence of institutional scaffolding, transnational social capital becomes the primary currency for international students; however, the informal nature of these networks means that access to critical career information is often unevenly distributed.

From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics align with Putnam's (2000) concept of bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital, which involves connections across diverse groups, enhances access to resources and networks that support long-term integration and stability. In contrast, bonding social capital, which involves ties within homogeneous groups, provides emotional stability but may also reaffirm social isolation. A sustainable internationalization strategy must therefore cultivate both, allowing international students to navigate cultural diversities while building equitable professional networks.

### **Sustainability-Oriented Internationalization in the Global South**

While economic imperatives often drive internationalization, this study adopts the framework of 'sustainability-oriented internationalization' (SOI). Moving beyond the environmental definition, SOI in higher education prioritizes social equity, ethical engagement, and long-term reciprocity over short-term recruitment gains (Hung & Yen, 2022). It challenges the 'cash cow' narrative by advocating for support systems that ensure international students are not merely recruited for revenue but are integrated into the social and economic fabric of the host country. In the Indian context, this implies shifting from a transaction-based model to one that fosters 'sustainable educational ecologies,' where student mobility leads to mutual capacity building and equitable career outcomes rather than blocked aspirations (Xu et al., 2025). This theoretical lens is critical for emerging hubs such as India, where infrastructure must evolve to support the 'whole student' rather than just the academic enrollment. As Rizvi (2019) argues, global interconnectivity in education generates profound ethical challenges; therefore, systems must be designed not only to produce market-ready graduates but also to foster reciprocal relationships that respect the agency and moral complexity of mobile students.

## **Gaps and Emerging Directions**

Despite extensive research on international student mobility, three key limitations persist. First, most global studies prioritize the conventional Global North, leaving the distinctive contexts of South–South mobility underexplored. India, despite its growing share of international enrollments, has received limited scholarly attention regarding the employability and long-term career outcomes of its foreign graduates. Second, empirical work remains fragmented across disciplines, lacking integrated frameworks that connect microlevel adaptation (e.g., belonging) with macrolevel structures (e.g., visa policy). Third, concepts such as “ethical” or “sustainability-oriented internationalization,” although increasingly discussed, are rarely operationalized in empirical research (Bajia & Nagda, 2025).

Addressing these issues requires an integrated analytical framework. While acculturation theory captures microlevel adaptation (Berry, 1997) and two-step migration highlights macrolevel policy constraints (Carling & Schewel, 2018), social capital (Putnam, 2000) serves as the connective tissue. By unifying these frameworks, this study examines how informal networks and mentorship (social capital) mediate a student’s ability to navigate campus integration (acculturation) and ultimately negotiate labor market entry and settlement policies (two-step migration), offering a comprehensive view of how aspirations interact with systemic constraints. Furthermore, integrating sustainability principles, such as inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and long-term employability, can reorient internationalization toward equity rather than simply mobility.

In synthesizing global and Indian perspectives, the literature underscores that internationalization must extend beyond recruitment to encompass holistic student development. Theoretical frameworks must evolve to capture the differentiated nature of international student mobility, grounded in local realities but responsive to global transformations. Consequently, this study’s examination of international students in India contributes to emergent scholarship by bridging the analytical divide between education and employment while embedding internationalization within culturally and ethically responsive practices.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to trace the education-to-career pathways of international students in India. A qualitative approach was selected to give students a voice and to understand how their individual experiences relate to institutional and legislative structures that influence their employability and sense of belonging.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative inquiry is especially appropriate for the study of complex social processes in which meanings, perceptions, and context play a crucial role (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Yin (2018), the case study design allows

for a detailed investigation of a closed system, in this case, international students in Indian universities. Case studies enable researchers to look at phenomena in a comprehensive way, taking into account the personal and structural sides that determine the experience (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007; Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2022).

While methodologies such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) offer valuable insights into the psychological essence of individual lived experiences, a multiple-case study design was deemed more appropriate for this inquiry. The study’s objective drove this choice to examine not only the internal world of the students but also how their experiences are structurally conditioned by external systems, specifically, institutional policies, visa regulations, and labor market dynamics. As Yin (2018) argues, case studies are uniquely suited for situations where the “boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” By treating the student experience as a case within the broader “bounded system” of the university and national policy environment, this design allows for a holistic analysis of the interplay between agency and structure, which a purely phenomenological approach might underemphasize.

**Participants and Sampling**

The present work adopts a multiple-case strategy involving three universities in Delhi, Pune, and Bengaluru. These institutions were chosen to reflect differences in institution type (public vs. private), locality, and the mix of fields. By having more than one site, the researchers aimed for analytic generalization rather than statistical generalization (Stake, 2006). The design of the research relies on the researchers’ reflexivity and situated understanding, which aligns with interpretivist epistemology that recognizes participants’ subjective meanings.

**Table 1 Demographic and Institutional Profile of Participants (N = 30)**

Category	Characteristic	Participants (n)
Gender	Male	16
	Female	14
Region & Country of Origin (n = 12)	South Asia: Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka	10
	Africa: Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Egypt, Kenya	11
	Southeast & East Asia: Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia	6
	Middle East: Iran, Yemen	3
Discipline	STEM (Engineering, Computer Applications, Biotechnology)	11
	Social Sciences (Sociology, Political Science, Psychology)	10
	Management & Commerce (MBA, Finance, Economics)	9
Degree Level	Master’s Degree	18

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	PhD/Doctoral Candidate	8
	Bachelor's/Undergraduate	4
Study Location	Delhi (North) – Central University	10
	Setting	
	Pune (West) – Private & State Universities	10
	Bengaluru (South) – Technical & Deemed Universities	10

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*Note.* Participants ranged in age from 20 to 30 years.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative research methods that are semi structured and in-depth interviews were used to gather data. The method is acknowledged as the best means of obtaining detailed narratives in cross-cultural research (Liamputtong, 2008). All interviews lasted for 1 to 1.5 hours and were held either in English or Hindi. The medium of instruction in Indian higher education is English; consequently, functional English proficiency was a prerequisite for participant admission. Therefore, the primary language of data collection was English. However, to build rapport and ensure narrative fluidity, participants were offered the option to switch to Hindi, where they felt more comfortable (particularly among South Asian participants). As the principal investigator is fluent in both English and Hindi, no external interpreters were needed, ensuring that the nuance of participant narratives was preserved without loss of meaning through third-party translation.

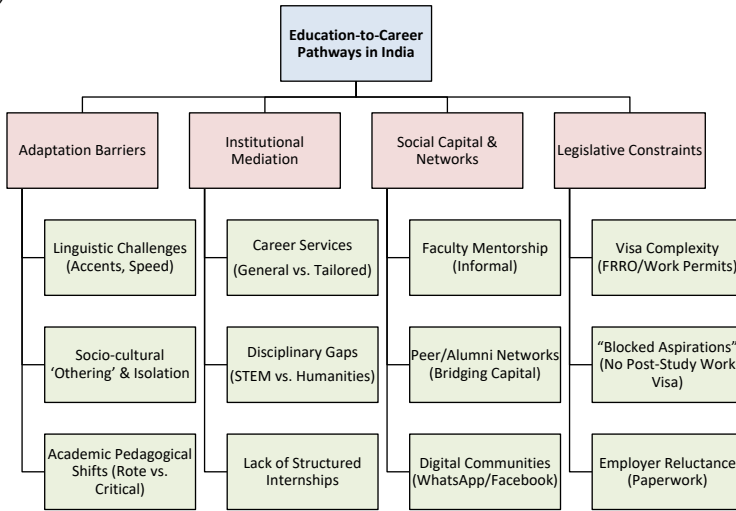
The interviews were based on an interview guide that was organized around four aspects: (1) educational choice and motivations, (2) institutional experiences and support, (3) employability and career aspirations, and (4) belonging and future mobility plans. Consent was obtained from all participants to record the interviews. Verbatim transcripts of all interviews were made. The field notes were also kept to record the nonverbal gestures and the thoughts of the researchers about the situation.

For triangulation purposes, apart from interviews, some institutional documents such as university internationalization policies and materials from career services were reviewed. To enhance methodological rigor and credibility, data triangulation was employed (Patton, 2015). The themes emerging from student interviews were cross-referenced with an analysis of institutional policy documents (e.g., International Student Handbooks, University Placement brochures) and national visa regulations (e.g., Ministry of Home Affairs guidelines). This process ensured that student narratives regarding “policy confusion” or “lack of support” were contextualized against the actual regulatory frameworks they were navigating.

### **Data Analysis**

Braun and Clarke’s (2021) six-step reflexive thematic analysis framework was followed for data examination. The stages are familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. Reflexive thematic analysis enables the researchers to go through the participants’ accounts in an iterative and flexible way, looking for patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

This research was carried out with the help of NVivo 14, a qualitative data analysis software that enhances the quality and openness of qualitative research by making the process of coding and theme connection more systematic (Wong, 2008).



**Figure 1: Thematic Map of Education-to-Career Transitions**

Hybrid coding strategies involving both inductive and deductive codes directed the work. Inductive codes were obtained entirely from the data, while deductive codes were associated with theoretical frameworks such as acculturation (Berry, 1997) and two-step migration (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

By a continuous comparative method, the themes were adjusted and eventually became four major themes, that is, adaptation barriers, institutional mediation, employability and legislation, and mentorship networks. Memos were created to keep track of the analytic decisions and thus provide a link between the raw data and the interpretive outcomes.

**Ethical Considerations**

Considering the intercultural and cross-institutional character of the research, ethical integrity was sustained according to the instructions for cross-cultural qualitative interviewing (Peters & Giacumo, 2020). The participants were provided with formal information sheets that explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews. Cultural sensitivity

was ensured by employing facilitators who were familiar with the cultural backgrounds of the participants and by following the confidentiality protocols while storing and reporting the data. To address power imbalances, interviews were made dialogic and reciprocal, thus enabling participants to check their transcripts and clarify meanings before the final analysis.

To maintain the highest standards of quality, the research implemented Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement, data source triangulation, and member checking. Dependability was ensured through a detailed audit trail that documented the methodological decisions and changes. Confirmability was facilitated through reflexive journaling whereby the researchers recorded their biases, positionality, and possible influences on the interpretation. Transferability was implemented by offering richly descriptive contexts of the Indian higher education scene, enabling the readers to make their own judgments about the applicability of the results to the different contexts.

The reflexive position played an important role in dealing with cross-cultural differences. As Braun and Clarke (2021) put it, reflexivity is the continual awareness that the researcher's positionality affects how data are constructed and meanings are made. The regular debriefing sessions with academic mentors and peer researchers helped the researchers maintain interpretive accountability and transparency throughout the analytic process.

The strength of the case study design is that it allows the capture of the different aspects of internationalization as an experience that is influenced by social, structural, and cultural systems (Greenhalgh, 2025). While large-scale surveys that measure student satisfaction or track mobility are less able to do so, qualitative case studies produce detailed, contextually grounded, and thus essential insights for understanding how institutional practices and policies translate into real-world career trajectories (Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2022). Moreover, the combination of thematic analysis and theoretical frameworks leads to greater methodical strength by connecting individual stories with wider academic paradigms. This intersectional approach is a starting point for the creation of culturally diverse, equitable, and sustainable international higher education policy-oriented recommendations.

## **RESULTS**

The qualitative findings of the study, based on interviews with 30 international students across three major Indian universities, have been organized into four emergent themes: (1) adaptation barriers and adjustment dynamics; (2) institutional mediation and employability outcomes; (3) the significance of informal networks and mentorship; and (4) the effects of legislative and policy structures on long-term career pathways. These themes capture the intersecting influences of personal, institutional, and systemic factors that shape education-to-career transitions for international students in India.

### **Adaptation barriers and adjustment dynamics**

International students reported a range of challenges in their initial period of adjustment, notably in relation to language, academic styles, and social integration. Despite English-medium instruction, nonnative English speakers frequently face academic marginalization. Linguistic divergence, such as unfamiliar accents and pacing, forces students to ‘spend extra hours just understanding the assignments,’ directly straining their academic capacity. Socioculturally, students from nonadjacent regions (e.g., East Asia and Africa) experience heightened ‘othering’ and occasional microaggressions, which compound their isolation and acculturative stress. Several described cultural misunderstandings and occasional microaggressions from domestic students, which contributed to feelings of isolation and anxiety. Furthermore, structural mismatches in pedagogical expectations create distinct academic friction; the institutional shift toward environments expecting ‘a lot of self-studies’ leaves students feeling they have ‘to manage everything alone’ without the guided frameworks of their home countries. While informal peer networks become essential survival mechanisms to navigate this isolation, access to these groups remains uneven. Despite these obstacles, students who proactively engaged in campus activities, such as student unions, language workshops, or intercultural events, reported more positive adaptation experiences and lower levels of acculturative stress.

### **Institutional mediation and employability outcomes**

The role of institutional structures was central in shaping students’ perceived employability and actual career opportunities, both during and after their studies. Although all the universities sampled had international student offices, students reported varied experiences in accessing guidance about internships, job fairs, and skills development programs. Many institutional career services lacked tailored support for international graduates, often prioritizing domestic students. Consequently, students encounter offices that do not ‘know about international student placements’ and cannot ‘answer... questions about visas,’ severely limiting their confidence in seeking internships. This structural opacity forces a reliance on individual advocacy, where students feel they must ‘speak up or know the right people’ just to avoid staying ‘out of the loop,’ highlighting a critical gap in institutional equity.

From a disciplinary perspective, students in STEM fields and business management programs reported relatively higher rates of internship and industry engagement, facilitated by institutional linkages with local employers. Conversely, those in the humanities and social sciences faced more difficulty securing relevant work experiences, reflecting sectoral disparities noted in national employability reports. Notably, only a handful of participants were able to translate internships into poststudy employment, predominantly in the IT and finance sectors.

A distinct disciplinary divide was observed in employability trajectories. While STEM and Management students in Bengaluru and Pune reported frequent industry interfaces through organized ‘placement drives,’ Social Science students,

particularly in Delhi, relied almost exclusively on personal initiative to find internships. Furthermore, regional variations emerged: students in Bengaluru's IT-centric ecosystem reported a more 'welcoming' corporate reception toward visa sponsorship than their counterparts in Delhi, who frequently encountered bureaucratic hesitation from employers unfamiliar with international hiring protocols.

### **The Significance of Informal Networks and Mentorship**

A significant finding of this study is the outsized role of informal peer and faculty networks in mediating adaptation and employability. Over two-thirds of interviewees credited their academic mentors with providing practical guidance on coursework, career advice, and navigating administrative hurdles. Mentorship actively buffers the 'overwhelming' initial phases of linguistic and pedagogical adjustment, helping students 'settle in' while simultaneously brokering crucial industry access, from reviewing CVs to introducing students to 'people working in [their] area'.

Peer networks formed a secondary, yet equally important, layer of support. Students who joined language clubs, cultural associations, or international student collectives gained access to information about internships, part-time work, and community engagement opportunities. However, the reliance on informal networks means essential career opportunities are often accessed through backchannels, such as a 'WhatsApp group, not from official university channels. Without formalized mentoring programs, this support is unevenly experienced; students lacking initial social capital remain disconnected, further heightening perceived inequities in academic and employment outcomes.

### **Legislative and structural constraints on career pathways**

The absence of clear poststudy work rights and the complexity of India's employment visa regimes emerged as pervasive barriers to career integration and long-term settlement. Nearly all students described confusion regarding visa requirements, employer sponsorship, and poststudy stay regulations. The systemic reluctance of domestic employers 'to deal with international hiring paperwork' or process applications for 'a foreigner' forces highly qualified graduates into a paradigm of blocked mobility. Despite graduating 'top of [their] class,' students frequently find that possessing 'the qualifications, but not the right visa' compels them to 'look outside India for a future'. This structural barrier drives onward migration, accentuating the urgent need for policy coherence between higher education internationalization and immigration rules to foster a sustainable, reciprocal knowledge economy. Despite such constraints, a minority of participants, those who excelled academically and cultivated networks with faculty or diaspora communities, found ways to remain in India by securing rare research or teaching fellowships. Their narratives suggest that while agentic adaptation can sometimes overcome structural barriers, this is the exception rather than the rule.

The results paint a picture of both promise and persistent challenges. International students in India are drawn by affordability, English-medium instruction, and India's growing reputation, yet they face formidable barriers to adaptation, employability, and long-term integration. The qualitative evidence suggests that informal mentorship and robust peer networks can help mitigate some obstacles, especially in situations where formal institutional support is lacking. However, deep-seated policy and structural barriers, particularly those related to post-study work, significantly influence decisions regarding onward migration or return to one's country of origin. These findings reinforce the need for universities and policymakers to view internationalization not as a finished project but as a dynamic, systemic commitment, one that integrates culturally responsive guidance, tailored skills development, and a more explicit linkage between education and employment in both policy and practice. This study examined the education-to-career pathways of international students in India through qualitative interviews across three universities, uncovering complex intersections between individual agency, institutional contexts, and policy frameworks. The key findings reveal multidimensional barriers to adaptation, variable institutional support that mediates employability outcomes, the critical role of informal networks and mentorship, and policy limitations affecting long-term career integration.

The findings confirm that international students in India face significant challenges during the adaptation phase, particularly in linguistic and sociocultural adjustment, aligning with global research on acculturation stress (Berry, 1997; Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024). Students who actively engaged with campus events and received language support reported better integration, reinforcing existing evidence that cultural immersion and institutional inclusivity foster a sense of belonging (Kristiana et al., 2022). These linguistic and cultural hurdles echo Subudhi et al. (2024), who identified a strong correlation between sociocultural maladjustment and academic stress in the Indian context. Furthermore, the positive impact of campus engagement observed in this study supports Sakız and Jencius's (2024) argument for the necessity of inclusive extracurricular frameworks.

## DISCUSSION

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The institutional role was revealed as a double-edged phenomenon: while some disciplines and metropolitan institutions provided targeted employability support and industry linkages, overall career services were insufficiently tailored to the unique needs of international students. This finding reinforces the argument by Xu et al. (2025) that higher education institutions in emerging hubs must transition from passive support models to 'active career stewardship' to ensure sustainable student retention. This corresponds with observations by Nachatar Singh et al. (2023) and Wang et al. (2025) on the global under provision of culturally responsive career guidance for international postgraduates. This also validates the 'exclusionary cycle' noted by Nachatar Singh et al. (2023), where the lack of culturally responsive career guidance exacerbates uncertainty for South Asian postgraduates.

Informal mentoring and peer networks emerged as vital support structures, consistent with Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital and research demonstrating the empowering effects of such relationships in higher education (Gupta et al., 2025; Deanna et al., 2022). While formal programs are scarce, the transformative potential of these informal 'multimenter systems' aligns with Sakız and Jencius (2024), effectively filling the institutional void. However, the lack of formal mentoring programs results in uneven access, perpetuating inequalities among students based on social capital and cultural familiarity. As Udah et al. (2024) observe, international student resilience is not merely an individual trait but is heavily mediated by external support systems; without institutional scaffolding, students are often left to navigate systemic shocks, such as policy shifts or global crises, in isolation.

Crucially, this study reveals that these theoretical constructs do not operate in isolation. Rather, social capital functions as the vital mechanism through which students attempt to translate their microlevel acculturation into macrolevel labor market integration. However, even when students successfully acculturate and amass robust social networks, their progression is frequently thwarted by systemic legislative constraints. The absence of structured poststudy visas and complex work authorization processes systematically severs the education-to-career pipeline. This dynamic vividly illustrates Carling and Schewel's (2018) concept of 'blocked aspirations' within the two-step migration framework, demonstrating how rigid policy environments ultimately override individual agency and localized social capital, forcing onward migration. This phenomenon of 'onward migration' driven by policy barriers is consistent with recent findings by Nicol (2025) and Subudhi et al. (2024), who characterize such outcomes as structurally induced 'blocked aspirations.'

The adaptation challenges align with the extensive international literature on acculturation frameworks (Berry, 1997; Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024) but uniquely highlight the linguistic complexity in the Indian context, where English-medium instruction nevertheless interacts with diverse accents and academic norms. These nuances extend the scholarship by demonstrating that language proficiency alone is insufficient when cultural and pedagogical expectations diverge significantly from students' origins (Subudhi et al., 2024).

Institutional comparisons align with global findings, which indicate that institutions with stronger employer ties and structured internships yield better employability outcomes (Nicol, 2025). The observed sectoral variation, where STEM and business fields outperform humanities and social sciences in career placements, reflects the granularity noted in Wang et al.'s (2025) analysis of postgraduate employability in heterogeneous job markets. These findings align with Barton et al. (2021), who note that while workplace volunteering and internships can enhance employability literacies, international students often face distinct linguistic and cultural barriers that prevent them from fully capitalizing on these opportunities without targeted mentorship.

The importance of social capital in the form of mentorship is strongly corroborated by Gupta et al. (2025) and Deanna et al. (2022), who demonstrate how diverse and multilayered mentoring relationships buffer against institutional gaps and provide access to career resources that would otherwise be unavailable. The informal nature of such networks in Indian universities, however, contrasts with more formalized programs typical of Western institutions (University of Southern California, 2025), suggesting a significant opportunity for policy and program development.

On the policy front, the study supports the insights of Carling and Schewel (2018) and Nicol (2025) on how restrictive immigration and work policies limit the potential benefits of international student mobility, underscoring an urgent need for congruence between educational internationalization and labor market integration strategies.

The integration of two-step migration and acculturation theories into the Indian context contributes theoretically by demonstrating their utility beyond traditional Western host countries. This study enriches migration scholarship by contextualizing migration aspirations and realization within a South Asian setting marked by rapid growth in the education sector but limited labor market inclusion. It highlights the nuanced ways in which students' acculturation is mediated by both institutional micro contexts (university support structures) and macrolevel policy frameworks (visa regulations), arguing for a multiscalar analytical lens in future mobility research. Furthermore, the findings extend social capital theory by showing how informal networks compensate for formal institutional weaknesses while also reinforcing existing inequalities, necessitating deliberate institutional strategies to democratize mentorship access. Finally, the operationalization of sustainability-oriented internationalization remains conceptual in the literature; this study offers empirical directions by identifying equitable support systems and policy integration as foundational components.

For universities, the results signal the need to strengthen international student services by developing culturally responsive career guidance, fostering formal mentoring programs, and expanding engagement opportunities that promote social integration. Universities in India should prioritize creating structured pathways that bridge academic learning with local industry needs, particularly for students in underrepresented fields, to improve employment outcomes. To operationalize sustainability-oriented internationalization, universities must move beyond generic orientation programs to implement ‘career-integrated support systems.’ Concrete measures include the establishment of ‘International Alumni Mentorship Portals’ that connect current students with successful graduates in their specific home regions and the introduction of ‘Legal Clinics’ to demystify visa regulations for both students and potential employers. Furthermore, institutions should curate ‘Work-Integrated Learning’ (WIL) pipelines specifically for non-STEM graduates, ensuring that students in humanities and social sciences gain the practical exposure necessary to compete in the global labor market.

Policymakers must reconsider visa and work authorization frameworks to facilitate poststudy work opportunities for international graduates. Creating poststudy work visas aligned with two-step migration models, as used effectively in Canada and Australia, could enhance retention and knowledge exchange (Crossman et al., 2020). Simplifying immigration procedures and providing clearer information on rights would reduce uncertainty and enhance students’ ability to plan long-term careers in India. Moreover, embedding sustainability principles means internationalization policies should move beyond recruitment to incorporate long-term integration goals. This involves investing in institutional capacity to deliver inclusive services, supporting student agency, and promoting ethical frameworks that value diverse cultural identities within academia.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While the study’s qualitative case design allowed depth and nuance, its findings are not statistically generalizable across all international students in India. The relatively small sample and concentration in three urban universities may underrepresent experiences in smaller institutions or rural contexts. Language barriers limited participation to individuals comfortable with English or Hindi, potentially excluding less linguistically privileged students.

While this study provides in-depth insights into the metropolitan student experience, it acknowledges an ‘urban bias.’ The concentration of participants in major education hubs (Delhi, Pune, Bengaluru) may not reflect the steeper challenges faced by international students in Tier-2 or rural institutions, where support infrastructure is often less developed. Future research should therefore employ a comparative design including nonmetropolitan universities to capture the full spectrum of international student experience in India. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits insight into longitudinal trajectories and changes in employability or belonging over time. Future studies could adopt

mixed methods to triangulate qualitative narratives with survey data or institutional records.

Building on this study, future research should explore longitudinal designs to track the transitions of international students beyond graduation, capturing the evolution of their career patterns and migration decisions. Investigating the experiences of students in less urbanized and smaller universities will yield a more comprehensive national picture.

Further inquiry into the design and impact of formal mentoring programs tailored to Indian contexts is needed, including evaluations of digital mentorship platforms that can efficiently scale support. Comparative studies examining policy impacts on international student retention between India and other emerging education hubs would also advance the understanding of best practices in sustainable internationalization.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the education-to-career pathways of international students in India, revealing the intricate interplay of adaptation challenges, institutional mediation, informal support systems, and legislative constraints shaping their experiences. Through in-depth qualitative inquiry, the findings emphasize that while India's higher education landscape offers growing opportunities, significant barriers remain in facilitating smooth transitions from study to sustainable career integration.

The study confirms that adaptation issues, spanning language difficulties to sociocultural adjustment, must be addressed comprehensively to foster students' sense of belonging, a key factor linked to academic persistence and well-being (Berry, 1997; Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024). Institutional support varies widely, with career services often being insufficiently tailored to the unique circumstances of international students, paralleling global challenges in providing culturally responsive guidance (Nachatar Singh et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). Informal mentoring and peer networks emerge as critical mediators, yet their uneven accessibility signals an opportunity for universities to formalize and expand such support structures.

Furthermore, the research highlights how restrictive visa and work policies constrain employability prospects and long-term settlement, leading many students to return home or seek onward migration despite achieving academic success. Aligning with concepts of two-step migration and blocked aspirations (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Nicol, 2025), this highlights the necessity for cohesive policy frameworks that integrate the internationalization of education and labor market access.

The implications are clear: universities should prioritize culturally responsive, equity-focused career guidance and mentorship programs, while policymakers must reconsider visa regimes to facilitate poststudy employment opportunities. Significantly, internationalization must expand beyond recruitment metrics to encompass sustainability principles, ensuring that the agency,

inclusion, and meaningful integration of international students into India's socioeconomic fabric are prioritized.

Although the study is limited by its qualitative scope and sample size, which are restricted to select urban universities, its findings offer valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to enhance India's global education role. Future longitudinal and mixed-methods research can deepen our understanding of career pathways and institutional innovations that support the success of international students.

In conclusion, India's aspiration as a global higher education hub hinge not only on attracting international students but also on creating inclusive, sustainable education-to-career ecosystems. Adopting ethically grounded and culturally attuned strategies will enable India to realize the full potential of internationalization as a conduit for knowledge exchange, social equity, and global prosperity.

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