

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



The impact of COVID-19 on the social and cultural integration of international students: a literature review

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Abstract

This systematic literature review summarises the state-of-the-art evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on the integration of international students in their host countries and institutions. Conducted between January and May 2022, it analyses the responses to COVID-19 of the key actors involved in international student mobility: national/regional authorities, higher education institutions, and students. Findings reveal that governmental action and institutional measures were decisive in shaping international students' integration experiences. Regarding governmental action, criticism of the policies adopted by Australia and the USA in relation to immigration and/or support stand out, in contrast to policies adopted by the Canadian authorities. Higher education institutions played an important role in mitigating the negative effects of COVID-19 on international students' integration. These targeted different needs— material, well-being, and social— through different types of support: logistical and financial support, psychological support, and the provision of platforms for ongoing social interaction and exchange. Most studies, however, focus on the students themselves, the challenges they faced during the pandemic and their coping strategies. Common to international students' lived experience was (dis) connectedness, with the following themes emerging as obstacles to their social and cultural integration: distress during lockdown periods, disruption of their social life and support networks, mental health issues, discrimination and racialised prejudice, and language barriers. The review concludes by proposing recommendations and by identifying avenues for future research.

Keywords International students, Integration, COVID-19, National policies, Institutional support

Introduction and rationale

Integration of international students represents a major challenge for host countries and institutions. Integration occurs at several levels: social, cultural and academic. This systematic literature review aims to gather comprehensive state-of-the-art evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on the social and cultural integration of international students in their host countries and institutions. By social integration we understand the formal contact between colleagues on learning matters and informal interaction with peers and participation in student activities (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). This implies a sense of belonging (Rivas et al., 2019), which can be expressed by the size of social networks and the quality and quantity of interactions (Merola et al., 2019). In turn, cultural integration is associated with the sphere of cultural habits, values, beliefs or language (Algan et al., 2012) of the host country. Academic integration (adjustment to the learning and teaching environment) lies outside the scope of this review.

The social and cultural integration of international students may pose multiple challenges (Smith & Khavaja, 2011). Students are likely to experience several major life changes because studying abroad entails being in a new culture and social environment. They must adjust to a different lifestyle (e.g., food, climate), a different culture (e.g., dressing, communicating and ways of doing things) (Li & Gasser, 2005) and, in many cases, to a new language (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Zhou et al., 2008; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015). International students may additionally struggle with the absence of their families and the lack of support, with a loss of sense of belonging and homesickness (Li & Gasser, 2005; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Thompson & Esses, 2016; Nada & Araújo, 2019). These life changes can easily become linguistic, sociocultural and discriminatory sources of stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Therefore, many factors related to culture (e.g., culture shock), emotional state (e.g., depression and anxiety), negative attitudes of the locals (e.g., discrimination), and academic involvement (e.g., collaborative learning) may affect international students (Rivas et al., 2019). A successful integration is paramount to ensuring students' satisfaction, academic success and retention. For international students, hosting institutions play a crucial role in integration, which can be facilitated through tailored support services, information provision, initiatives that bring national and international students together, counselling and so on (Ward, 2015; Gu et al., 2010; Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016; Nicolescu & Galalae, 2013; Thompson & Esses, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered even more challenging the conditions of international students' social and cultural integration. The negative impacts on higher education students have been abundantly documented at various levels, for instance, on mental health (Aristovnik et al., 2020), learning and academic performance (Doolan et al., 2021; Fuchs, 2022), social life (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Doolan et al., 2021; Elmer et al., 2020) and financial conditions (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Le, 2021). These impacts have been even more profound for international students (Gallagher et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020). During COVID-19, institutions were shut down, countries around the world imposed general lockdowns and travel restrictions and social distancing made travel and an active social life impossible (Elmer et al., 2020). In a context where these students were away from their homes, families and support networks, such circumstances aggravated their situation. Isolated and incapable of returning home, host institutions became, for many, the key actors they could rely on for advice, support and information (Sahu, 2020). Hence, the role played by higher education institutions for international students'

integration, already significant, became vital during COVID-19 (see Le, 2021 or Sahu, 2020). International students' integration during the pandemic was also heavily affected by the national policies and the public health measures imposed by governments worldwide (Qi & Ma, 2021; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). Revised immigration regulations for residence and student status, restrictions on entering the host country, and the provision (or lack of) emergency support are measures that shaped international students' ability to integrate and feel welcome or neglected in their host country.

To our knowledge, there is currently no systematic literature review on the impact of COVID-19 on the social and cultural integration of international students. As integration is shaped by policies and initiatives taken at several levels, the review's objective is to analyse the responses to COVID-19 of the actors involved in international student mobility (ISM). We aim to unveil if and how these responses have impacted international students' integration. We also aim to investigate the integration experiences of students themselves. The overarching research question that guides this literature review is: How has COVID-19 impacted the social and cultural integration of international students in their host countries and institutions? To capture the different levels that shape international students' experience of social and cultural integration, we broke down the research question into the following three sub-questions:

How have national governments responded to COVID-19, and how has this affected international students' integration?

How have institutions responded to COVID-19, and how has this affected international students' integration?

How have international students experienced their integration during COVID-19?

Methodology

This work was conducted according to the PRISMA statement on systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009). A team of 21 researchers working on ISM from various disciplinary perspectives (linguistics, sociology, education, etc.) undertook the different steps of identification, selection and analysis of documents. Regular group discussions ensured consistency of approach. Aware that, when conducting social research, interpretations are very likely to be subject to human bias (Baker, 2012, p. 255), we followed robust steps in the different stages of the review, both during the selection of documents and their subsequent analysis. To minimize bias, the following steps were taken: First, inclusion criteria were agreed upon and clearly defined in a team meeting, after which they were written down and shared with everyone for easy reference during the document search and selection process, which is described in detail below. Second, authors worked in pairs and doubled-checked each other's choices. Whenever in doubt, they discussed their decisions to reach consensus. When doubts persisted, the coordinators made the final decision based on their overview of the entire corpus. Third, interpretations and regular discussions involving the whole team were frequent to ensure consistency and resolve any questions. These endeavours to reduce bias are mentioned, when applicable, in the detailed description of the PRISMA stages below.

The literature corpus was built as a multiple-stage process. First, based on the research questions, we identified search terms (and synonyms/variations) for the analysed group (international students), the process (integration) and the pandemic (COVID-19) (see Table 1). Second, we performed the search in six databases (Scopus, Web of Science,

Table 1 Search terms for the identification of literature

Group	Process	Phenomenon
International student*	Integration	Covid-19
Mobile student*	Inclusion	Pandemic
Foreign student*	Adaptation	
Exchange/Erasmus student*	Student support/support	
Study abroad	Government/policy	

ERIC, Proquest, Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstracts and PsychInfo) to ensure broad coverage and retrieve as many publications as possible. Given the novelty of COVID-19, limiting the search to the most selective databases posed the risk of leaving out studies containing relevant evidence.

We applied the following inclusion criteria: (1) Only peer-reviewed publications were selected to ensure a minimum quality standard. (2) Publications were directly related to the review research question. (3) Only publications with retrievable full texts were selected. (4) Publications had to be research-based, thus excluding opinion articles, commentaries, or letters to editors. (5) Publications were in English. Although language represented a limitation in the breadth of covered literature, this decision was important as the group was international and rather large. Double-checking (as referred to above) would, therefore, not have been possible in other languages.

Each team member was attributed a different combination of search terms and a different database. Initially, the search was performed in the title, abstract and keywords only, but in some databases (e.g., Scopus), this strategy returned very few results. In such cases, the search was extended to full texts to identify additional potentially relevant literature. The cut-off date for the search of documents was May 2022. The findings of more recent studies are therefore not reflected in this review, which may be seen as a limitation.

The automatic search in the six databases returned 7708 documents (see Fig. 1). Each team member conducted an initial screening of the results retrieved by their specific search string and database to refine the selection, based on the reading of the abstract and the observance of the inclusion criteria. One hundred fifty-nine publications, which appeared to meet the inclusion criteria, were retained, of which 22 documents were duplicates (present in several databases). This resulted in a provisional corpus of 137 documents. Two articles, at the time still in press, were added by the review authors. Two researchers subsequently screened each of these 139 documents in more detail to decide independently if the documents were indeed eligible to be considered in the review. The screening in pairs was aimed to minimise researcher subjectivity, as a reliability check to ensure that the inclusion criteria were met. This resulted in the further exclusion of 59 documents, mainly for not being research-based or having no or little relevance to the review topic. After this step, 80 documents were, therefore, assessed as eligible. Additionally, ten records of grey literature were identified as potentially relevant for the review. In total, the provisional review corpus contained 90 documents.

The next stage was the full reading of the documents. Also at this stage, two researchers read each document individually, again to reduce subjectivity bias and as a quality assurance measure. The aim of the quality assessment was to check the robustness of the employed method and the logic and coherence in the data analysis, results, and conclusions. The two readers discussed any disagreement between them and, if doubts

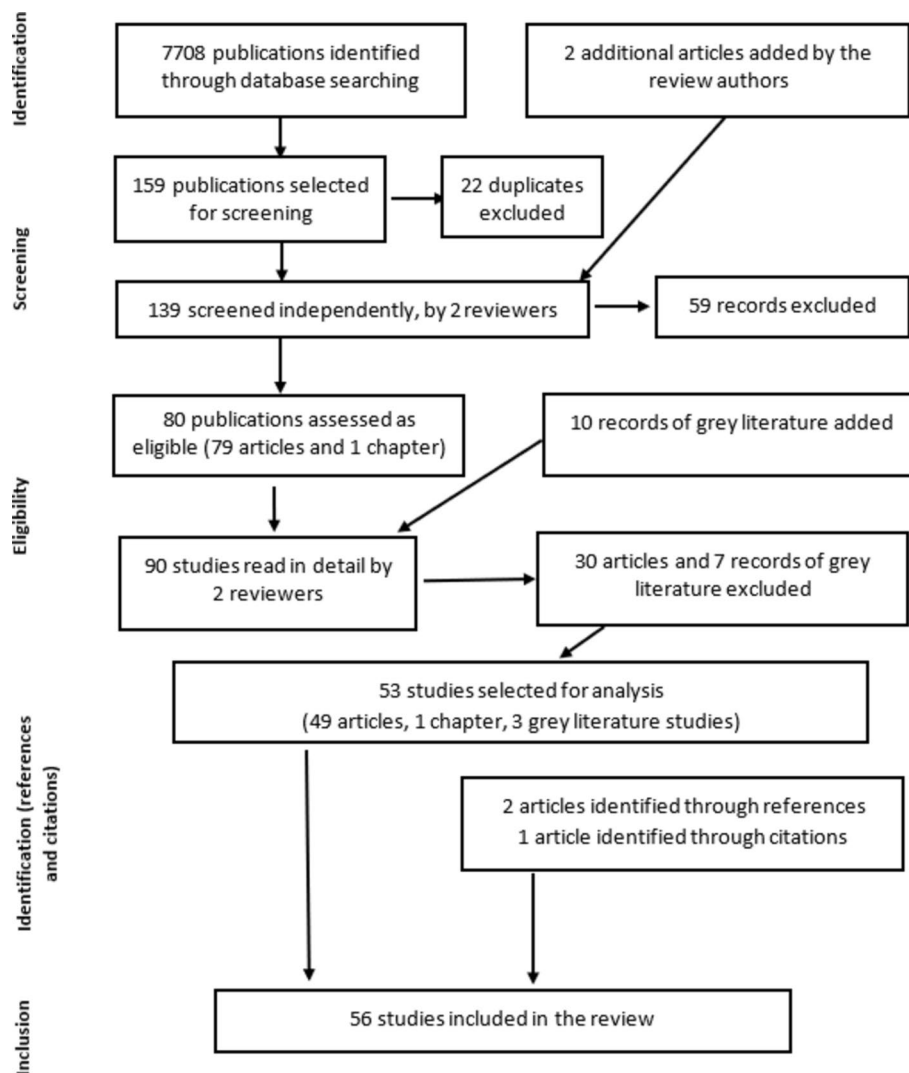


Fig. 1 The PRISMA multi-stage process resulting in the constitution of the literature review corpus

persisted, the review coordinators made the final decision. This process ensured reliance on high-quality studies to construct the major arguments. Following this stage, 37 studies were excluded: 30 articles and seven grey literature documents. The reasons were mainly related to the marginal relevance for the review topic. Several studies that were excluded at this stage dealt, for example, with the remote learning and teaching experience, not discussing any relationship to the social and cultural integration of international students. In this phase, two more studies were identified through references (backward search) and one study through citations (forward search).

The 56 studies of the final corpus were analysed following a protocol for standardised data extraction to minimise researcher subjectivity (Tranfield et al., 2003). For this purpose, data extraction categories were defined in a group meeting (see Fig. 2) and these represented our coding framework. To enable collective work, this coding framework was transposed into a Google Excel sheet, which contained the list of selected studies. All relevant data and information that we needed to perform the analysis and synthesis of the reviewed literature was recorded on this shared document. The sheet acted as a record of the decisions made during the process and represented the data repository

- Author(s)
- Affiliations
- Year
- Title
- Journal
- Source (database name, own knowledge, forward search, backward search)
- URL
- Abstract
- Research question(s)/aim(s)
- Type of ISM (degree, credit, virtual...)
- Destination country
- Home country
- COVID-19 period the publication is about: Year, month(s)
- Theoretical approaches (if identified)
- Methodology (qualitative, quantitative, mixed)
- Specific method, if identified (e.g., interviews, statistical analyses, case study)
- Sample [size, discipline, type of participants (student, staff...)]
- Research Question 1 Results: How have national governments responded to COVID-19 and how has this affected international students' integration?
- Research Question 2 Results: How have institutions responded to COVID-19 and how has this affected international students' integration?
- Research Question 3 Results: How have international students experienced their integration during COVID-19?
- Limitations: Needs/gaps in terms of research
- Recommendations for practice/policymaking

Fig. 2 Coding framework

supporting the analysis (Tranfield et al., 2003). Again, two researchers, independent of one another, analysed each study, extracted the relevant information independently, and the findings were compared and reconciled, if needed.

For the three research questions, we retrieved relevant fragments from the literature which answered specifically these questions. The analysis of these fragments across the selected studies was performed by three pairs (one for each research question). The pairs conducted inductive analysis, allowing the main themes for each question to emerge from the data (see themes in the section *Findings*). We stress again the caveat that the review results rely on texts exclusively in English and retrieved before the cut-off date of May 2022, which restricts their linguistic and temporal scope.

The next section provides an overview of the selected literature, analysing its key descriptive characteristics by discipline, authors' affiliations, mobility types, home and destination countries, theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Then, the next section will discuss the main themes resulting from the inductive analysis to identify patterns regarding the impact of COVID-19 on international students' integration.

Mapping the field: descriptive overview of the reviewed studies

The 56-document corpus comprised 53 pieces of peer-reviewed literature (52 articles and one chapter) and three reports (grey literature), searched and identified between January and May 2022. Most studies reported on the first phase/semester of COVID-19 ($n = 26$), which was expectable considering the time articles take to be peer-reviewed and the search cut-off date.

Journal subject area. As shown in Fig. 3, the articles were published mainly in education journals (25, of which six in higher education, seven in international education, one

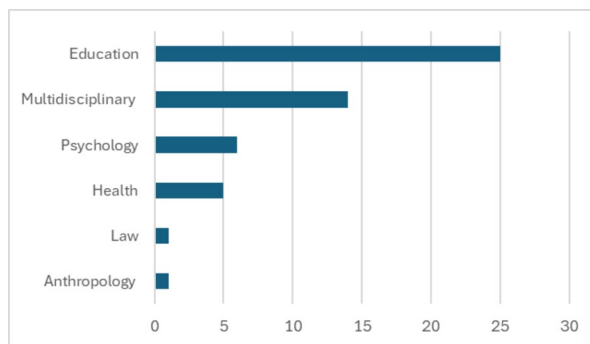


Fig. 3 The distribution of articles by journal subject area

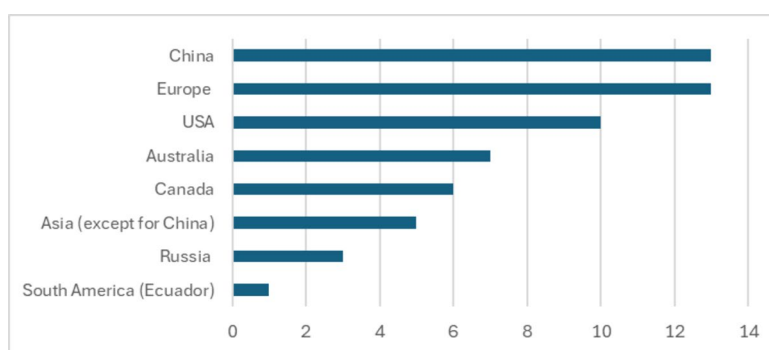


Fig. 4 Authors' country/region of affiliation (total number of affiliations is higher than 56 because of co-authorships)

in language education and eleven in generic ones), followed by multidisciplinary journals (14 journals, in fields such as mobilities or intercultural relations), psychology (6), health (5), law (1) and anthropology (1). The *Journal of International Students* was the most frequent publication outlet (5 of the 52 articles). The grey literature reports were published by two European organisations, the European Commission and the Erasmus Student Network (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2020; Gabriels & Benke-Åberg, 2020) and an Australian research organisation (Uzhegova et al., 2021).

Affiliations. Most of the authors of the reviewed studies (Fig. 4) were, at the time of publication, affiliated with institutions located in China (13), the USA (10), Australia (7) and Canada (6). Authors affiliated with European institutions were spread across different countries (13). It is worth noting that the UK, as a traditional major destination of international students, was only represented in two articles (unlike the USA, Canada or Australia).

Mobility types. A wide nomenclature to refer to ISM emerged at the initial stage of coding. To ensure consistency in the coding across the team, two researchers standardised all initial codes and developed a classification with four overarching categories: degree mobility, credit mobility, virtual mobility and miscellaneous. As shown in Fig. 5, most studies (45 out of 56) dealt with degree mobility. These were followed by papers classified as miscellaneous (5). Only three studies analysed credit mobility (part of a degree programme). Due to the specific conditions of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interest in virtual course delivery started gaining traction, but the number of studies on virtual mobility was small (3).

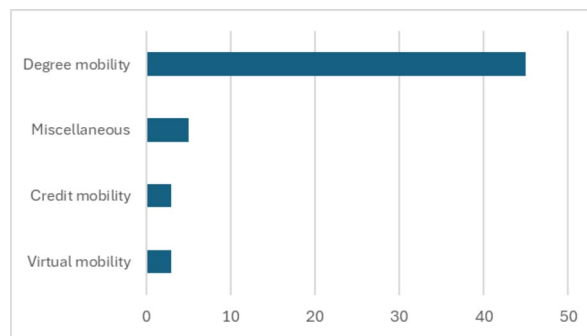


Fig. 5 Types of mobility covered by selected literature

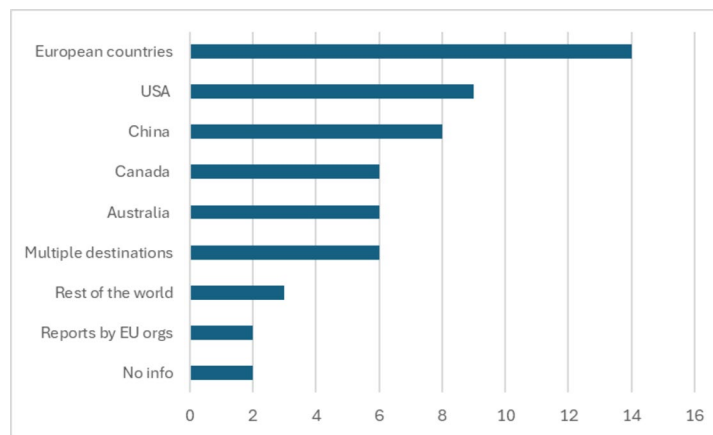


Fig. 6 Destination countries/regions

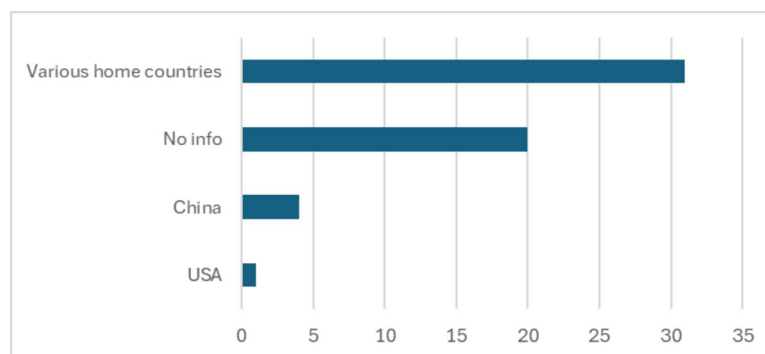


Fig. 7 Home countries

Destination countries. Of the 56 studies, 46 focused on a single destination country (Fig. 6). The most frequently investigated host countries were the USA (9), China (8), Canada (6) and Australia (6). European destination countries were studied in 14 articles. In the non-European context, Ecuador, Jordan and Saudi Arabia were explored as destination countries (3). The remaining studies included either articles targeting multiple destinations (6) or reports published by European organisations (2). Two studies had no information regarding the destination country.

Home countries. The analysed studies generally refer to students from various home countries (31)– Fig. 7. Only five studies focused on students from one specific country

of origin, four from China and one from the US. On the other hand, many studies did not report any information about home countries (20). A reason could be that studies focused on international students in general and that the interest lay in their experiences in the host country, irrespective of country of origin. It is worth noting, however, that ten studies focused on international students from Asia (including the four from China), signalling the region's importance as a sender of international students.

Theoretical approaches. The reviewed studies drew on theories and concepts from psychology (such as the stress process model or transactional model of stress and coping), sociology (such as neo-racism and institutional theory) and mobility theories (such as mobility justice, mobility capital, and elastic borders). Most papers (34, almost two-thirds) had no theoretical framework, indicating that ISM during the pandemic was predominantly approached empirically. Perhaps, the hastiness to publish work did not provide room for theoretical development.

Research methodology. Over half of the studies (35) adopted a qualitative design, with interviewing being the most common data collection method (Fig. 8). While other systematic reviews of ISM before COVID-19 mainly summarised quantitative studies (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023; Nicolescu & Galalae, 2013), this review only identified 13 studies using quantitative methods. Five studies had no empirical data and three studies used mixed methods through the triangulation of various data sources.

The participants in the reviewed studies were mostly international students (undergraduate and postgraduate), but also faculty members (Chen & Wen, 2021), student services professionals (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022), institutional leaders and middle managers (Sin et al., 2023), coordinators of Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters and Doctoral programmes (European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2020), parents and migration agents (Qi & Ma, 2021).

Findings

For analytical purposes, the findings have been organised to answer the three research questions of the review. Indeed, most studies focused on one level of analysis only: how national authorities responded to COVID-19, what emergency measures institutions adopted or international students' lived experiences, which is reflected in the presentation of the findings. However, the three levels are interconnected, as testified by various examples in the three sections below. First, we present national authorities' responses to COVID-19 and their reported effects on the integration of international students.

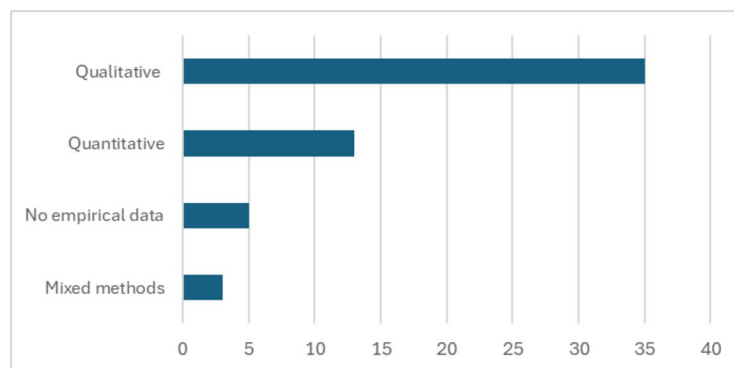


Fig. 8 Methodological design of selected literature

Second, we consider the measures and initiatives taken by higher education institutions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and continue fostering the integration of international students. Finally, we look at the international students' experience of social and cultural integration during the pandemic.

National governments' responses to COVID-19 and their impact on international students' integration

There were 13 studies dealing with governmental responses to COVID-19 (see Table 2), mostly discussing policies related to international students' travel to/from and permanence/residence in the host country. Some policies were criticised as unwelcoming, such as in Australia and the United States. To a lesser extent, other policies (e.g., Canada) emerged as supportive of international students, contributing to a feeling of integration in the country, nonetheless ignoring some essential needs of international students.

Unwelcoming policies leading to feelings of exclusion

The Australian government's responses to COVID-19 came under criticism, particularly its unfriendly and unsupportive policies towards international students and its deliberate inaction or careless attitude (Qi & Ma, 2021; Blackmore, 2020; Fronek et al. 2021; Uzhegova et al., 2021). Qi and Ma (2021) reported that these students felt rather let down by the Australian federal government's crisis management, considering that authorities offloaded their responsibilities. Following border closures to all non-residents in March 2020, international students were excluded from the main measures of financial aid, which were available to Australian citizens and residents to help pay expenses during the lockdown (Qi & Ma, 2021; Crock & Nutter, 2021; Fronek et al. 2021; Greenland et al., 2024). They were virtually ignored and became homeless, hungry, discriminated against and displaced in a country that had previously welcomed them for the revenue they represented (Fronek et al. 2021). International students experienced financial hardship, income loss, social and lifestyle changes, cessation of travel, and mental health (Greenland et al., 2024). In international students' eyes, responsibility was transferred to families, universities, communities, and state and local governments, which compensated with much-needed support (emergency assistance with meals, accommodation, living expenses, rental reliefs and student support networks) (Qi & Ma, 2021). The federal government's measures suggest that international students were seen as a source of revenue, as cash cows, without a concomitant feeling of responsibility or obligation (Blackmore, 2020; Qi & Ma, 2021; Crock & Nutter, 2021; Uzhegova et al., 2021). Crock and Nutter (2021) argued for the creation of legally binding standards to address the specific needs of temporary migrants. Reinforcing the Australian government's careless attitude, Blackmore (2020) predicted long-term reputational damage to Australia as an international

Table 2 Studies addressing government responses to COVID-19 impacting international students' integration

Categories	Studies
<i>Unwelcoming policies leading to feelings of exclusion</i> (11)	Australia (6): Blackmore (2020); Crock and Nutter (2021); Fronek et al. (2021); Greenland et al. (2024); Qi and Ma (2021); Uzhegova et al. (2021) USA (2): Honegger and Honegger (2020); Sustarsic and Zhang (2022) Canada (2): Brunner (2022); Firang and Mensah (2022) Russia (1): Minaeva and Taradina (2022)
<i>Policies generally favouring international students' integration</i> (3)	Canada (2): Brunner (2022); Chaulagain et al. (2022) China (1): Sarker et al. (2021)

student provider in Asia. In Russia, too, the issue of international education was only minimally addressed at the national level. It was the universities that carried out the key activities and had to come up with solutions “in the field” (Minaeva & Taradina, 2022).

Two studies also addressed the US government’s hostile policies towards international students and how these contributed to feelings of no longer being welcome in the country (Honegger & Honegger, 2020; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022). Migration or travel policies caused anxiety and frustration. For example, new international students had difficulties obtaining student visas, while continuing students who travelled to their home country during the Christmas break faced uncertainty regarding their return to the USA in the spring, due to travel restrictions or inability to renew their student visas (Honegger & Honegger, 2020). There were also sudden changes to immigration policies, which students experienced as “cruel,” “frustrating,” “inhumane,” “unreasonable,” and “unfair” (Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022).

Canada, although generally supportive of international students (see below), appears to have fallen short regarding emergency support. International students were excluded from emergency student benefits for being non-permanent residents. Government support was also “elusive” for international students because their part-time employment could not allow them to reach the minimum earnings requirement (Brunner, 2022; Firang & Mensah, 2022). For this reason, international students could not depend on public support (Brunner, 2022).

Policies favouring international students’ integration

Canada’s policy responses regarding international students differed in that they framed international students as being crucial to the ongoing functioning of the Canadian economy, both during the exceptional moment of COVID-19 and in anticipation of their potential future citizenship (Chaulagain et al., 2022). For example, Brunner (2022) reports that higher education institutions and politicians lobbied the government to ensure that virtual learning would not affect eligibility for postgraduate work permits. While before study permits and their associated entitlements demanded that students should study in Canada in person, during the pandemic, for the first time, international students could accumulate mobility capital before entering Canada. Additionally, international students were allowed to work more than 20 h per week, although temporarily and only when this was deemed essential. The pandemic reinforced the value of international students to the Canadian economy and their value as potential future citizens (and taxpayers) (Chaulagain et al., 2022).

In China, Sarker et al. (2021) reported that international students were mostly happy with the measures taken by governmental authorities and trusted them. However, this study did not focus on students’ evaluation of measures directly affecting social integration and economic well-being, but of measures taken to ensure physical safety.

Institutions’ responses to COVID-19 and their influence on international students’ integration

Institutions have always played a key role in the integration of international students. As noted by Uzhegova et al. (2021), “it cannot be assumed that having students from diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom guarantees an internationalised learning experience or that international and domestic student interactions would occur naturally” (p.

4). This highlights the necessity for institutions to provide the support that facilitates interaction and integration within the learning environment. In recognition of that, Ye (2022) noted that international students constituted a group that universities needed to “look out for” (p. 710). During the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions arguably had a greater duty of care towards international students who, in many cases, were stranded in the host country without family or social support networks and with precarious visa situations. Institutions’ responses were addressed in 14 studies (see Table 3) and the analysis yielded three main themes: providing a home away from home, mental health and psychological well-being and maintaining social integration.

Providing a home away from home

With the onset of COVID-19 measures, borders were closed, and campuses entered lockdown, placing international students in a very precarious situation. Some institutions recognized this and immediately implemented what Fronek et al. (2021) describe as “communities of support” (p. 4). This was firstly facilitated through the easing of financial pressures, which allowed students to remain in the country and in the institution. Measures taken included: deferring tuition fees, prolonging grant funding, offering emergency funding (Fronek et al. 2021; Honegger & Honegger, 2020) or making accommodation complimentary for degree-mobility international students— occasionally to the detriment of credit-bearing students (Cairns et al., 2021). Provisions made for housing were particularly beneficial to a sense of belonging. Although most campus dorms immediately went into lockdown, some universities in Australia (Fronek et al. 2021) and the USA (Ye, 2022), for example, permitted international students to stay, often free of charge. In addition, some institutions provided further support, such as food, clothing and IT equipment to cater to the students’ basic needs (Sin et al., 2023; Fronek et al. 2021; Honegger & Honegger, 2020; Zhang & Zhu, 2022).

Mental health and well-being

Many institutions were also acutely aware of the mental health issues that arose with isolation. Some institutions established models of psychosocial care specifically designed to keep students in touch with both the institution and, where appropriate, the community (European Commission, 2020; Fronek et al. 2021). The holistic models engaged case managers and student and community counselling services for support. Additionally, institutions organised opportunities for peer support and technological platforms to help alleviate mental health issues related to isolation. For example, Sin et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of peer support and found that interpersonal contact and mutual support among students were crucial for mental health and well-being. The

Table 3 Studies addressing institutional responses to COVID-19 impacting international students’ integration

Themes	Studies
Providing a home away from home (6)	Cairns et al. (2021); Fronek et al. (2021); Honegger and Honegger (2020); Sin et al. (2023); Ye (2021); Zhang and Zhu (2022)
Mental health and well-being (5)	English et al. (2022); European Commission (2020); Fronek et al. (2021); Honegger and Honegger (2020); Sin et al. (2023)
Social integration (9)	European Commission (2020); Fronek et al. (2021); Gabriels and Benke-Åberg (2020); Hinojosa and Karambelas (2020); Sarker et al. (2021); Uzhegova et al. (2021); Veerasamy & Ammigan (2021); Xu et al. (2021); Zhang and Zhu (2022)

communication system set up by the university, as noted by English et al. (2022), allowed members of the university community to stay in touch, alleviating isolation. Furthermore, morale was kept up by community members sharing videos and stories among themselves. Finally, European universities offered a range of measures tailored especially to Erasmus exchange students, e.g., a 'health hotline' (European Commission, 2020).

Social integration

Beyond community building through attendance to the immediate physical and mental health needs of international students, institutions made provisions for ongoing social integration. This had a dual purpose of simply keeping students in touch with each other and furthering intercultural awareness (Xu et al., 2021; Zhang & Zhu, 2022; Hinojosa & Karambelas, 2020). For example, Zhang and Zhu (2022) highlighted the benefits of establishing online forums, WeChat groups and in-person activities (restrictions permitting) in maintaining integration. Some European universities introduced online activities, such as quizzes, sports and cooking classes, to ensure social outlets for Erasmus students (European Commission, 2020). Online activities for social immersion were also developed in some universities with the aim of facilitating intercultural learning. Students were given opportunities online to listen to and understand the local cultural context in Ecuador. A virtual meeting space was also established, where international students could share information about themselves, their cultures, and their lives (Hinojosa & Karambelas, 2020). In the USA, measures included virtual career advising, a well-being discussion series, weekly coffee hours and social events to support intercultural processes and cultural integration online (Veerasamy & Ammigan, 2022). International students also received support from student organisations (Gabriels & Benke-Åberg, 2020).

Summing up, the institutional responses to COVID-19 were crucial for international students' integration and their satisfaction with the university, thereby keeping them in the academic system and resulting in deeper cultural and social integration (Sarker et al., 2021). The fact that students and even professors kept reaching out to each other (Xu et al., 2021) or awareness of the challenges and isolation faced by international students among fellow national students (Uzhogova et al., 2021) favoured integration. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that not all institutions succeeded in providing the necessary support structures for integration. In fact, Gabriels and Benke-Åberg (2020) indicated that 42% of students in their large-scale study of Erasmus students did not feel supported by their host university.

Students' experiences of integration during the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic affected international students' experiences of integration in host countries and institutions in many ways. Common to their lived experience was (dis)connectedness. Tran and Gomes (2017) defined connectedness as a relational concept that refers to the physical and virtual relationships international students hold with people, places, communities and organisations. During the pandemic, connectedness was disrupted (Dong & Ishige, 2022; Hasnain & Hajek, 2022), as many international students had to self-isolate. The students' experience was addressed in 37 studies and their analysis revealed six themes across the reviewed literature: distressing lockdowns, disruption

Table 4 Studies addressing students' experiences of integration during the COVID-19 pandemic

Themes	Studies
Distressing lockdowns (6)	Collins et al. (2022); Devlin and Magliacane (2021); Geréb Valachiné et al. (2022); McGahey (2021); Tikhonova et al. (2021); Zahrae Afellat and Alipour (2021)
Disruption of social life and support networks (14)	Abramova et al. (2021); Cairns et al. (2021); Mbous et al. (2024); Firang and Mensah (2022); Hari et al. (2021); Kapun et al. (2020); Koo (2021); Koris et al. (2021); Lin and Nguyen (2021); Pappa et al. (2020); Raaper et al. (2022); Sustarsic and Zhang (2022); Trzcionka et al. (2021); Younis et al. (2021)
Mental health issues (16)	Abramova et al. (2021); Amoah and Mok (2022); Fanari and Segrin (2021); Firang and Mensah (2022); Ge (2021); Geréb Valachiné et al. (2022); Kapun et al. (2020); Khan et al. (2021); Koo (2021); Lai et al. (2020); Lin and Nguyen (2021); Pappa et al. (2020); Trzcionka et al. (2021); Xu (2021); Younis et al. (2021); Zahrae Afellat and Alipour (2021)
Discrimination (13)	Abramova et al. (2021); Alsawalqa (2021); Anandavalli et al. (2020); Chen and Wen (2021); Firang and Mensah (2022); Gabriels and Benke-Åberg (2020); Hari et al. (2021); Honegger and Honegger (2020); Koo et al. (2023); Mbous et al. (2024); Mok et al. (2021); Rzymiski and Nowicki (2020); Xu et al. (2021)
Language barriers (5)	Abramova et al. (2021); Firang and Mensah (2022); Lin and Nguyen (2021); Tikhonova et al. (2021); Xu et al. (2021)
Coping strategies (6)	Collins et al. (2022); Geréb Valachiné et al. (2022); Kifle Mekonen and Adarkwah (2022); Nardon and Hari (2021); Sustarsic and Zhang (2022); Yang et al. (2020)

of social life and support networks, mental health issues, discrimination, language barriers, and coping strategies (see Table 4).

Distressing lockdowns

Closure of physical places impacted social interaction and integration severely, as physical spaces were unavailable, online instruction came into force and physical activity was limited (Devlin & Magliacane, 2021; Geréb Valachiné et al., 2022; Tikhonova et al., 2021). Daily routines changed and students spent more time indoors, in isolation, away from their social support networks. The dorm emerged as a closed circuit that combined living, work, and leisure activities in one space (McGahey, 2021). A study conducted in Cyprus exemplifies some international students' boredom and exhaustion from being home, even disregarding the public health recommendations to avoid contact with other students (Zahrae Afellat & Alipour, 2021).

Disruption of social life and support networks

The impossibility of socialisation represented an obstacle to social and cultural integration. For instance, many research articles report on the lack of social contact and disruption of social life in general (Cairns et al., 2021; Abramova et al., 2021; Mbous et al., 2024). According to Cairns et al. (2021), the mobility experience lost "its capacity to contribute to the process of learning about and integrating into different societies" (p. 180). Lin and Nguyen's (2021) autoethnographic study revealed the risk of online education undermining social inclusion through disconnection and isolation. Student support networks were relatively small, but dense in contact and interaction, primarily focused on family and other students (Raaper et al., 2022). Limited contact with families also aggravated the acute lack of social life (Trzcionka et al. 2021; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022; Koo, 2021). Kapun et al. (2020) underscored the importance of social support for international students in Slovenia, which made them question their continued stay.

Mental health issues

A frequent theme that emerged from many research articles was the persistent mental health issues experienced by international students, especially during lockdown and isolation: psychological problems and discomfort (Kapun et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Trzcionka et al. 2021; Xu, 2021; Zahrae Afellat & Alipour, 2021), disorders such as stress (Fanari & Segrin, 2021; Younis et al., 2021) and depression (Ge, 2021), as well as loneliness (Abramova et al., 2021; Amoah & Mok, 2022; Ge, 2021), anxiety and feelings of loss of control (Pappa et al., 2020; Geréb Valachiné et al., 2022). Students, however, may have felt reluctant to seek psychological help because they carried beliefs, from their home countries, that they would be stigmatised (Amoah & Mok, 2022).

Discrimination

Several articles showcase a very important obstacle to social and cultural integration: racialized prejudices towards international students, especially those of Asian origins, students of colour and Italian nationality (especially at the onset of COVID-19). International students reported explicit discrimination and the sense of being not welcome and unsafe on campuses (Koo et al., 2023), discrimination based on their nationality and ethnicity (Gabriels & Benke-Åberg, 2020), or even cyberbullying because of their ethnic origins (Alsawalqa, 2021). Studies related to discrimination and racism were common in the USA context (Chen & Wen, 2021; Koo et al., 2023; Mbous et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2021; Honegger & Honegger, 2020) but not exclusive to it (Hari et al., 2021; Rzymiski & Nowicki, 2020). In Poland, Asian students experienced uncomfortable situations in the street and on public transport, e.g., requests to change seats or cover their mouths and judgmental facial reactions (Rzymiski & Nowicki, 2020). Similar reactions towards international students of Asian origin were reported on university campuses, with other students stepping away, staring continuously, making xenophobic comments, assuming that wearing a face mask is equal to being positive or even lecturers making inappropriate comments during the class. The racial discrimination against international students was so severe that some even found the lockdown on campuses a certain relief (Koo et al., 2023).

Language barriers

The language barrier, aggravated by COVID-19, also challenged international students' integration (Abramova et al., 2021; Firang & Mensah, 2022; Lin & Nguyen, 2021; Tikhonova et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). For example, Xu et al. (2021) reported that Chinese students in the US felt disappointment about the difficulty of practicing English, becoming proficient and experiencing the American culture during lockdown. Two studies conducted in Russia also highlighted how language was an obstacle for adaptation to the host society (Tikhonova et al., 2021) or for academic integration in a context of distance learning (Abramova et al., 2021). Language difficulties in online delivery were also reported in Australia (Lin & Nguyen, 2021).

Coping strategies

International students resorted to several coping strategies to navigate the pandemic times. In China, postgraduate international students volunteered to distribute masks and thermometers, monitor people's body temperatures on entering the campus, and

inform students about COVID-19 prevention measures. The study found that volunteering led to well-being and satisfaction (Kifle Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022). The urban public/shared gardens represented an escape for international students, “a safe arena (...) to maintain social contact with friends outdoors”, providing “social well-being and a sense of community as well as individual well-being” (Collins et al., 2022, p. 6). Geréb Valachiné and colleagues (2022) highlighted art-making as a strategy to handle the difficult isolation and Yang et al. (2020) referred to positive thinking and resilience. Sustarsic and Zhang (2022) found that international students sought emotional support transnationally, from friends and family back home, as a common way of coping.

Discussion and conclusions

This study systematically reviewed 56 studies focusing on international students’ integration into their host countries and institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, published between the outbreak of the pandemic and May 2022. Because international students’ integration depends not only on themselves but also on governments and higher education institutions, the review aimed to understand both how international students experienced their integration and how governments and institutions responded to COVID-19 and how these responses affected international students’ integration.

We found that governmental action and institutional measures were decisive in shaping students’ integration experiences. Criticism prevailed of the immigration and support policies adopted by Australia and the USA, frequently considered unfriendly towards international students and detrimental to integration, contributing to feelings of exclusion. This reinforced the perception of students as cash-cows, especially in Australia. Canada, in contrast, treated international students as valuable guests, i.e., granting study permits and associated entitlements without students’ physical presence in the country or allowing them to work extended hours. Higher education institutions played an important role in mitigating the negative effects of COVID-19 on international students’ integration, by catering to different needs— material, well-being, and social. They offered material conditions allowing international students to continue in the institution; psychological support in the form of, for example, counselling, home visits and virtual peer support; and provision of platforms for ongoing social interaction to ensure a continued sense of belonging to the institution’s community. Most studies, however, focused on students themselves and on the integration challenges which they encountered during the pandemic: distressing lockdowns, disruption of social life and support networks, mental health issues, discrimination and racialised prejudice and language barriers. Disconnectedness was a common theme in the reviewed studies. Students resorted to various coping mechanisms to improve their well-being.

Policy and practice recommendations. The review findings warrant some recommendations. Given the anxiety caused by national policies, universities may benefit from enhanced cooperation with the government in managing migration more generally. Crock and Nutter (2021) even recommended a convention regulating the rights of international students. COVID-19 can also represent an opportunity for governments to rethink international education and develop disruptive models that can offer sustainable solutions, during emergency and normal circumstances, grounded in more humane and compassionate values (Tran, 2020).

Within HEIs, mental health and counselling services capable of addressing international students' circumstances need developing (Ge, 2021; Raaper et al., 2022), e.g., sensitive to cultural differences and helping students deal with discrimination and building a sense of positive self-regard (Anandavalli et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020). It is also important to deconstruct the stigmas associated with mental health in different cultures and make international students comfortable with seeking psychological advice (Ge, 2021). In practice, it is only possible for universities not to ignore the mental health problems of international students if their psychological support units and international offices cooperate. The review also highlighted the importance of support networks (Raaper et al., 2022), institutional support and belonging. Indeed, institutions have implemented interventions (e.g., virtual socialising activities), but it is important that more institutionalised forums be created, not only for social networking but also as spaces where international students can share experiences. In practice, it is very important for socio-cultural integration that these socialization initiatives start during mobility and in the pre-departure phase, before the students arrive. Further, international student offices may provide a safe place for international students to report racism (Koo et al., 2023; Koo, 2021). Regular support groups or regular check-in sessions to see how students are doing, which institutions developed during the pandemic, can be the basis for a more general system of continuous support. It is also important to anchor international students in their local environments, as this allows them to create networks also outside the university, contributing to social engagement in local communities (Amoah & Mok, 2022), for example through volunteering. Implementing all these processes in universities can be possible by adopting the comprehensive internationalization model developed by Hudzik (2011) in institutional management; in other words, it implies involving all academic and administrative units in the processes rather than associating international students only with the international office.

Additionally, intercultural sensitivity could be promoted throughout the institutions, for example through a diversity policy guiding the work of all units and schools, and through training sessions and workshops which raise local students and staff's awareness of the socio-cultural needs and challenges faced by international students. In sum, it is critical to ensure that any measures are mindful of inclusivity and diversity to ensure solutions for all students. Moreover, instead of merely adopting a "crisis management" approach, HEIs could benefit from medium-long-term planning and sustainable transformation, embedding some of the practices adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such transformation could support not only the recovery of ISM more generally but also create an educational climate that celebrates international students on campus, alleviating their potential social isolation and ensuring well-being (Amoah & Mok, 2022; Anandavalli et al., 2020).

Limitations and further research. This systematic review has some limitations. First, the selection of literature published in English only may have also overlooked studies on the review topic published in other languages. Future reviews based on literature written in different languages may add novel perspectives. Second, the cut-off date for the search was May 2022, so studies that may be relevant and could add to this panorama were omitted. Since some time has elapsed since then, an updated literature review may enrich our knowledge of COVID-19's impact on international students' integration. Third, the elaboration of this review still during the COVID-19 pandemic may explain

the poor theoretical conceptualization of international students' integration in disruptive times. The observed scarcity of conceptual frameworks highlights the need for more theoretically solid work on the impact of global crises on integration.

Despite the flurry of research activity related to ISM during the pandemic, the rushed, intensive nature of the period left several other gaps and scope for future follow-up. First, further research needs to investigate how integration may have been affected differently by different demographic characteristics within the international student population. This requires comparative studies with a broader geographical scope to gain insights from various racial groups and explore whether the findings vary in different cultural and disciplinary contexts (Alsulami, 2021; Dong & Ishige, 2022; Hari et al., 2021; Sarker et al., 2021; Sustarsic & Zhang, 2022; Xu, 2021). For this, larger and more diverse samples, as well as random sampling techniques, are needed to ensure the representativeness, validity and generalisability of findings (Dong & Ishige, 2022; Zahrae Afellat & Alipour, 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Alsulami, 2021; Xu, 2021). Such research could add a quantitative dimension, which was scarce in the reviewed literature. Further research is also needed to evaluate in hindsight the impact that the measures taken by institutions during the pandemic had on international students in the longer run. For example, large-scale, more comprehensive surveys could be administered by international research teams to former international students in more than one country to gather comparative evidence. Based on a hindsight perspective, it would allow answering questions such as: What were the main challenges to sociocultural integration during COVID-19 for international students? Were they different for students of different ethnic backgrounds/genders/qualification levels/disciplines? How did experiences of integration differ in different countries? What measure did host institutions take to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on international students' integration and how effective were they? Furthermore, future studies could also target national and institutional actors and the circumstances and resources they were operating in to better prepare for other emergency situations. As time has passed since the pandemic outbreak, understanding how national and institutional policies and practices have been developed (or not) would be focal.

Acknowledgements

This article is based upon the work from COST Action CA20115 'European Network on International Student Mobility. Connecting Research and Practice', supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the following tasks: conception of the review; search, identification, selection of studies; document coding; and analysis of the different dimensions of the reviewed literature reported in the manuscript. [Author 1] and [Author 2] led the review team, wrote the sections *Introduction and rationale*, *Methodology* and *Conclusion* and compiled and edited the different authors' contributions in the sections *Mapping the field* and *Findings*. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data availability

The literature review corpus and the data extraction form will be available upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interests

None of the authors have any financial or non-financial competing interests in the manuscript.

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Received: 26 December 2023 / Accepted: 15 January 2025

Published online: 30 January 2025

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