

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Four Eras of International Student Mobility (1945-2025): Multipolar Securitization, Strategic Education Blocs, and the Rise of Middle Powers

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Abstract

This article analyzes international student mobility across four historical eras from 1945-2025: Cold War (1945-1989), Market Liberalization (1990-2008), Strategic Competition (2009-2022), and Multipolar Securitization (2023-present). Using mixed methods combining mobility data and policy analysis, we identify the emergence of Strategic Education Blocs (Anglo-American, Sino-Russian, European) and demonstrate how middle powers like India, Turkey, and Brazil are asserting agency in this evolving landscape. International student mobility has transformed from primarily state-sponsored exchanges to hybrid physical-virtual forms, with education increasingly functioning as strategic statecraft rather than merely soft power. We show how stakeholders both influence and are shaped by structural contexts, highlighting implications for balancing geopolitical considerations with educational accessibility in an era of digital transformation and multipolar competition.

Keywords: international student mobility, digital internationalization, geopolitics, Strategic Education Blocs (SEBs), international students

Introduction

International student mobility (ISM) has long been a defining feature of internationalization in higher education, expanding from fewer than a million mobile students in the late 1970s to about 6.9 million by 2022 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). Traditionally, ISM has been concentrated in the “Big Five” English-speaking destinations – the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand – while China, India, and South Korea account for a quarter of outbound student flows (Glass & Cruz, 2022). However, the landscape of global student mobility is undergoing a profound transformation. Geopolitical shifts, economic realignments, and the acceleration of digital learning are reshaping how and where students pursue international education (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023).

While existing scholarship has documented various aspects of ISM's evolution, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these shifts fit into broader historical and geopolitical contexts. Previous frameworks, such as Choudaha's (2017) “three waves” model and de Wit's (2002) seminal historical analysis of internationalization, have provided valuable insights. However, de Wit's work primarily focuses on Western contexts up to the early 2000s, while our analysis extends both geographically to include emerging powers and temporally to address contemporary developments in digital internationalization and geopolitical realignment. Similarly, while Choudaha's (2017) three waves framework usefully identifies market-driven phases of student mobility from 1999-2020, it focuses primarily on demand-side economic factors and destination country dynamics. Our analysis builds on Choudaha's waves by extending the temporal scope backward to capture Cold War dynamics and forward to examine post-pandemic transformations, while also incorporating supply-side factors, geopolitical drivers, and the emergence of strategic education blocs that transcend simple market competition. By situating ISM within distinct historical eras and examining the interplay between structural forces and stakeholder agency across these periods, this study offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding the complex evolution of global student mobility.

The traditional push-pull models have framed ISM primarily as a linear, demand-driven phenomenon shaped by economic incentives and institutional prestige (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), but recent scholarship highlights a more dynamic interplay of actors, structures, and motivations. The conventional model of international student mobility—defined by physical relocation—has become increasingly intertwined with virtual and hybrid modes of learning, challenging traditional distinctions between studying “abroad” and “at home” (Mittelmeier et al., 2021). This shift has been further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced universities to pivot to online learning and prompted governments to recalibrate visa, funding, and accreditation policies (Gümüş et al., 2020).

Beyond digitalization, ISM is now shaped by regional and geopolitical alliances that are reconfiguring student flows, research collaboration, and visa policies. As multipolar geopolitics intensifies, middle powers are asserting greater agency in ISM, leveraging South-South partnerships, digital platforms, and hybrid education models to

expand their influence. These shifts necessitate a reassessment of how governance structures and national strategies mediate ISM in an era of geopolitical competition, economic security concerns, and knowledge diplomacy.

This study contributes to international higher education scholarship by examining how ISM has evolved across distinct historical and geopolitical contexts and how emerging Strategic Education Blocs and middle powers are reshaping global mobility patterns. Using a comparative, multi-era framework, we analyze four key dimensions that have undergone significant transformation over time: (1) the shifting nature of mobility (physical, virtual, and hybrid); (2) the evolving agency of diverse stakeholders (students, universities, governments, and private actors); (3) changing governance frameworks at national, regional, and global levels; and (4) the rise of geopolitical multipolarity and digital transformation in shaping ISM patterns. By interrogating these dimensions, this study advances a more nuanced understanding of ISM as a strategic and adaptive phenomenon—one that is not merely shaped by economic forces but is also deeply embedded in the geopolitics of knowledge production and global talent migration.

The following sections constitute our literature review, examining each of these four dimensions in depth and tracing their evolution across different historical periods. This review provides the foundation for our subsequent analysis of the four distinct eras of ISM.

Literature Review: Four Key Dimensions of ISM

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The Shifting Nature of Mobility: From Physical to Hybrid Forms

The nature of international student mobility has evolved significantly over the past eight decades, from exclusively physical relocation to increasingly diverse and flexible forms of cross-border education. Historically, ISM required students to physically relocate to host countries for the duration of their studies (de Wit, 2002). However, the landscape has diversified considerably, particularly since the early 2000s, with the emergence of branch campuses, joint degree programs, and various forms of transnational education (Knight, 2004; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated this transformation, normalizing virtual mobility and hybrid learning models that combine online and in-person components (Gümüş et al., 2020; Woodman et al., 2023).

This evolution reflects broader technological and social changes, with digital platforms enabling new forms of international education that were previously impossible. Virtual exchange programs, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), and fully online international degrees have expanded access to cross-border education for students unable to relocate due to financial, personal, or political

constraints (Woodman et al., 2023). These developments have permanently blurred the boundary between on-site and online study, underscoring the need for frameworks that treat physical, virtual, and hybrid pathways as interacting modes of cross-border learning, rather than as discrete categories.

The Evolving Agency of Diverse Stakeholders

The distribution of agency among ISM stakeholders has shifted dramatically over time, reflecting changing power dynamics in global higher education. During the Cold War era, governments were the dominant actors, using scholarship programs and cultural exchanges as instruments of foreign policy and ideological competition (de Wit, 2002). The subsequent market liberalization period saw universities and students gain greater agency, with institutions actively recruiting international students for revenue and prestige, while students increasingly made strategic choices based on career prospects and educational quality (Chang et al., 2022; Marginson, 2006).

More recently, private actors have assumed increasingly influential roles in shaping ISM patterns. Education agents, ranking organizations, and edtech companies now significantly influence student decision-making and institutional strategies (Hazelkorn & Altbach, 2015; Nikula & Raimo, 2023; Tran & Vu, 2018). The rise of these non-state actors has created a more complex ecosystem where agency is distributed across multiple stakeholders, each with distinct motivations and capabilities.

This evolution challenges simplistic models that position students as passive responders to structural forces. Contemporary research emphasizes how students exercise agency through strategic decision-making, leveraging social networks and digital resources to navigate complex mobility pathways (Chang et al., 2022). Similarly, universities have become more sophisticated in their internationalization strategies, developing targeted recruitment approaches and transnational partnerships to attract diverse student populations (Gümüş et al., 2020; Nikula & Kivistö, 2020).

Changing Governance Frameworks

Governance structures for ISM have evolved from primarily bilateral arrangements during the Cold War to increasingly complex multilevel frameworks incorporating national, regional, and global mechanisms. National governance remains paramount, with visa policies, tuition structures, and post-study work rights significantly influencing mobility patterns (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023). However, regional frameworks have gained importance, particularly in Europe where the Bologna Process and Erasmus+ program have created standardized structures facilitating intra-regional mobility (Mittelmeier et al., 2021).

The governance landscape has become increasingly fragmented and contested, with tensions between economic, security, and diplomatic priorities shaping policy approaches. The growing securitization of ISM, particularly in STEM fields, reflects concerns about knowledge transfer and intellectual property protection in strategic sectors (Marginson, 2024; OECD, 2024). Meanwhile, the rise of digital and hybrid mobility has created governance gaps, as regulatory frameworks designed for physical mobility struggle to address the complexities of virtual and transnational education (IIE, 2021; Mittelmeier et al., 2021).

These governance challenges are further complicated by the massification of higher education globally, which has dramatically expanded the scale and diversity of international student populations (Marginson, 2016). As higher education systems worldwide have expanded access, ISM has grown from an elite phenomenon to a mass movement involving diverse socioeconomic groups and educational pathways (Gümüş et al., 2020). This massification has created new governance challenges related to quality assurance, credential recognition, and student support services.

The Rise of Geopolitical Multipolarity and Digital Transformation

The geopolitical context of ISM has shifted from Cold War bipolarity to post-Cold War American hegemony and, most recently, to an emerging multipolar order characterized by strategic competition between major powers and the rising influence of middle powers (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023). This evolution has profound implications for student mobility patterns, research collaboration, and knowledge diplomacy.

Digital transformation has further reshaped ISM by enabling new forms of cross-border education and creating virtual spaces for international collaboration (Chang et al., 2022). The rapid development of digital learning platforms, virtual exchange programs, and online credentials has expanded access to international education while challenging traditional notions of mobility (Woodman et al., 2023). These technological changes have coincided with geopolitical shifts, creating a complex landscape where digital and physical mobility pathways are increasingly shaped by strategic considerations and power dynamics.

The intersection of geopolitical multipolarity and digital transformation has created both opportunities and challenges for ISM. On one hand, digital platforms enable more inclusive and flexible approaches to international education, potentially democratizing access for students from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, digital divides, data sovereignty concerns, and platform governance issues create new forms of inequality and exclusion (Mittelmeier et al., 2021).

Methodology

This study examined the evolution of international student mobility (ISM) through a historical and analytical approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to explore the changing nature of mobility, governance structures, and geopolitical influences. While this study draws on multiple data sources and literature, it employs a historical analytical approach rather than a systematic review methodology, as our aim was to trace the evolution of ISM across different eras rather than to systematically identify and synthesize all available literature on a specific research question. Building on prior ISM frameworks—such as the "three waves" model proposed by Choudaha (2017)—the research extended the temporal scope to encompass earlier historical patterns and emerging trends in digital internationalization. To capture this breadth, the study employed a mixed methods framework, which Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) define as research that integrates quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis within a

single study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Specifically, we adopted a convergent mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then integrated during interpretation to develop a comprehensive understanding of ISM's evolution. This design allowed us to merge statistical patterns with contextual insights, revealing how geopolitical shifts, policy changes, and technological innovations have transformed international student mobility over time.

This methodological stance reflects the belief that quantifiable data must be contextualized historically (Tosh, 2015) and theoretically situated within the broader study of internationalization (Knight, 2008) to reveal deeper patterns. In doing so, the study systematically investigated what constituted mobility, who governed it, and why it mattered in a world increasingly shaped by digital technologies and shifting alliances. Drawing on the foundations of education research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) and qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the project sought to blend rigorous data analysis with interpretive depth, thereby offering a holistic lens on the evolution of ISM. This mixed methods approach was necessary not only for triangulation but also for complementarity—using quantitative data to identify macro-level patterns and trends in student flows while employing qualitative analysis to understand the underlying mechanisms, policy motivations, and contextual factors that quantitative data alone cannot reveal.

Data Sources

The researchers drew on multiple data sources to triangulate findings and ensure comprehensive coverage of ISM trends across different historical periods: The analysis relied on high-quality international datasets and policy reports from UNESCO, the OECD, the World Bank, and IIE. These sources provided comprehensive insights into student mobility flows, national and regional policy frameworks, and the economic and political rationales behind ISM.

UNESCO's *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students* database offered country-level enrollment figures, tracking outbound and inbound mobility trends over time. The OECD's *Education at a Glance* reports provided comparative indicators on higher education participation, tuition policies, and international student contributions to national economies. IIE's *Open Doors* and *Project Atlas* reports supplied detailed statistics on student migration, particularly within U.S. higher education. Additional reports from the World Bank illuminated economic and developmental drivers of ISM, especially in the Global South.

Beyond policy reports, the researchers drew on peer-reviewed journal articles that analyzed ISM from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including international higher education policy, mobility studies (Sheller & Urry, 2006), and geopolitical influences on student migration (Tran & Vu, 2018). This combination of statistical datasets and qualitative academic research provided a robust foundation for investigating ISM trends through both empirical measures and interpretive contextualization.

Data Analysis

A *mixed methods approach* guided the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). First, quantitative trend analysis deployed descriptive statistics to examine shifts in enrollment patterns, destination choices, and financial flows over time. Comparative metrics, such as market share fluctuations and tuition revenue, offered insights into structural transformations in global higher education.

Second, a qualitative thematic analysis examined policy reports, institutional strategies, and academic literature to contextualize and interpret quantitative patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By examining government white papers, multilateral agreements, and historical policy shifts, the researchers identified pivotal drivers of ISM in different geopolitical eras. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the identification of historical eras, where statistical shifts in enrollment patterns were interpreted alongside policy documents to establish era boundaries, as well as during the final interpretation phase, where quantitative trends were contextualized through qualitative insights to explain not just what changes occurred, but why and how different stakeholders responded to shifting geopolitical contexts.

From this combined analysis, the researchers detected four distinct eras of ISM. These eras emerged inductively, based on quantitative shifts in student flows and market dominance, alongside qualitative transformations in governance structures, geopolitical realignments, and digitalization trends. Instead of imposing arbitrary time frames, this historically grounded and methodologically rigorous framework (Tosh, 2015) allowed the research to tie policy decisions, economic incentives, and international mobility to broader geopolitical contexts. By triangulating data sources (Bray et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2018), the researchers offer a robust, evidence-driven periodization of ISM's historical trajectory, underscoring how mobility is shaped by—and, in turn, shapes—global higher education.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study: First, historical mobility data, particularly from the Cold War era, is often incomplete or inconsistent. UNESCO data, while comprehensive in geographical coverage, has known limitations including reporting gaps, definitional inconsistencies across countries, and challenges in capturing short-term mobility (Wells, 2014). Similarly, OECD data primarily focuses on member countries, potentially underrepresenting Global South perspectives. Publication bias in the scholarly literature may overrepresent certain perspectives or findings.

Second, the selection of policy documents and scholarly literature inevitably reflects certain biases, despite efforts to ensure diverse representation. English-language sources predominate, potentially limiting perspectives from non-Anglophone contexts. Data from organizations like the OECD and UNESCO reflect these institutions' priorities and methodological choices. The OECD's focus on economic development and UNESCO's educational mandate shape what data is collected and how it is presented. Similarly, publication bias in the scholarly literature may overrepresent certain perspectives or findings.

Third, any attempt to segment historical developments into distinct eras involves simplification and boundary-drawing that may obscure continuities and overlaps. The era boundaries proposed in this study represent significant inflection points but should be understood as permeable rather than absolute. Fourth, the researchers' positionality as scholars based in Western institutions may influence the interpretation of global trends. We have attempted to mitigate this through engagement with diverse literature and critical reflection on our analytical frameworks. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of multiple data sources and analytical approaches provides a robust foundation for examining ISM's historical evolution and contemporary dynamics.

Results: Four Eras of International Student Mobility

Our analysis identified four distinct eras in the evolution of international student mobility since 1945, each characterized by unique geopolitical contexts, governance structures, and mobility patterns. These eras are not entirely discrete—elements of each period overlap and continue into subsequent eras—but they represent significant shifts in the dominant forces shaping global student flows. Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of each era.

Table 1: Four Eras of International Student Mobility (1945-2025)

Era	Period	Geopolitical Context	Dominant Actors	Mobility Patterns	Governance Structures
Cold War	1945-1989	Bipolar competition	Nation-states	State-sponsored, ideologically driven	Bilateral agreements, cultural diplomacy
Market Liberalization	1990-2008	US hegemony, globalization	Universities, students	Market-driven, Anglo-American dominance	National policies, emerging regionalism
Strategic Competition	2009-2022	Rising multipolarity, economic nationalism	Universities, governments, private actors	Diversification, regional hubs	Securitization, regional frameworks
Multipolar Securitization	2023-present	Fragmented blocs, technological competition	Strategic Education Blocs, middle powers	Hybrid mobility, strategic alignment	Bloc-based governance, digital regulation

Cold War Era (1945-1989): Ideological Competition and State-Sponsored Mobility

The Cold War era was characterized by state-directed international student mobility serving ideological and diplomatic objectives. Both the United States and the Soviet Union established extensive scholarship programs to attract students from strategically important regions, particularly newly independent states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (de Wit, 2002). The Fulbright Program (established 1946) and Soviet scholarship initiatives became instruments of soft power, designed to cultivate political allies, and promote competing visions of modernity (Altbach & de Wit, 2015).

Mobility during this period was predominantly unidirectional, flowing from the developing world to the industrialized nations of the East and West blocs. Our analysis of historical UNESCO data shows that, by the 1970s, the bulk of international students originated from developing countries, and the United States, France, and USSR were the top three receiving nations (UNESCO, 1979). This pattern reflected both the educational capacity gaps between Global North and South and the strategic priorities of Cold War powers seeking to expand their spheres of influence.

Governance structures during this era were primarily bilateral, with government-to-government agreements establishing scholarship quotas, exchange programs, and academic partnerships. Universities had limited autonomy in international recruitment, functioning largely as instruments of national foreign policy (Altbach & de Wit, 2015). Student agency was similarly constrained, with mobility opportunities often tied to political considerations and state priorities rather than individual preferences.

The Cold War era established enduring patterns in global student mobility, including the predominance of North-South flows and the use of educational exchange as a diplomatic tool. However, the era also created ideological divisions in knowledge production and academic collaboration that would persist long after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Market Liberalization Era (1990-2008): Commercialization and Anglo-American Dominance

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the acceleration of economic globalization ushered in a new era of market-driven international student mobility. With the retreat of state-directed scholarship programs, universities—particularly in Anglophone countries—began actively recruiting international students as revenue sources (Marginson, 2006). This shift coincided with the massification of higher education globally, as expanding middle classes in emerging economies sought educational opportunities abroad (Gümüş et al., 2020).

In 2008, there were 3.3 million tertiary students enrolled outside their country of citizenship, of whom 2.7 million were studying in OECD countries—an increase of 67 percent in OECD-area enrollments since 2000. The “Big Five” destinations—the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and France—collectively hosted 49 percent of all internationally mobile tertiary students (OECD, 2010). The United Kingdom and Australia, in particular, developed explicit national strategies positioning international education as an export industry (Marginson, 2006).

This era saw a significant shift in agency from governments to universities and students. Institutions gained greater autonomy in international recruitment, developing

sophisticated marketing strategies and establishing offshore operations to attract global applicants. Students increasingly approached mobility as consumers, weighing educational quality, career prospects, and lifestyle factors in their decision-making (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Governance structures evolved to accommodate this market-oriented approach, with national policies focusing on visa facilitation, quality assurance, and brand promotion rather than diplomatic objectives. Regional frameworks also emerged, most notably the Bologna Process in Europe (launched 1999), which standardized degree structures and credit transfer systems to enhance intra-European mobility (Mittelmeier et al., 2021).

While the market liberalization era democratized access to international education for certain populations, it also reinforced existing inequalities. The commercialization of international education privileged students with financial resources, while the dominance of English-language instruction created advantages for students from Anglophone backgrounds and/or elite educational institutions (Marginson, 2006).

Strategic Competition Era (2009-2022): Diversification and Regional Hubs

The 2008 global financial crisis marked a turning point in international student mobility, initiating an era characterized by greater strategic competition and the emergence of new destination countries. Economic pressures intensified universities' recruitment efforts, while rising nationalism and security concerns prompted governments to reassert control over mobility patterns (Marginson, 2024).

Our analysis of UNESCO data shows significant diversification in destination countries during this period. While the "Big Five" English-speaking countries maintained their prominence, their collective share of global enrollments declined from about 41% in 2009 to roughly 33% by 2019 (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2024). Meanwhile, countries such as Russia, UAE, Malaysia, and Turkey emerged as significant regional education hubs, investing in internationalization as part of broader economic development and soft power strategies.

This era saw the rise of government-university partnerships in shaping international student recruitment. National strategies, such as Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2015-2025 and Russia's 5-100 Project, explicitly positioned international education as a tool for economic development and geopolitical influence (Gümüş et al., 2020). Universities aligned their internationalization efforts with these national priorities, developing targeted recruitment strategies for strategically important regions.

Governance structures became increasingly complex, with regional frameworks gaining prominence alongside national policies. The ASEAN International Mobility for Students program and similar initiatives in Africa and Latin America sought to promote intra-regional mobility, though with limited success compared to the European model (OECD, 2024). Meanwhile, bilateral agreements proliferated, often linking educational cooperation with broader economic and diplomatic partnerships.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) accelerated several trends that had been developing throughout this era, particularly the adoption of digital and hybrid mobility models. As border closures disrupted traditional mobility patterns, over 60% of universities worldwide introduced virtual or hybrid mobility programs—a shift that

normalized “mobility without movement” (Marinoni, Van’t Land, & Jensen, 2020; Mittelmeier et al., 2021). These developments challenged conventional definitions of international education and created new opportunities for students unable to relocate physically.

Multipolar Securitization Era (2023-present): Strategic Education Blocs and Middle Power Agency

The current era of international student mobility is characterized by increasing geopolitical fragmentation and the emergence of what we term Strategic Education Blocs (SEBs). These blocs represent aligned groups of countries that coordinate policies related to student mobility, research collaboration, and knowledge production in response to perceived security threats and strategic competition. Unlike previous regional frameworks focused primarily on educational harmonization, SEBs explicitly link international education to broader geopolitical and economic security objectives.

We propose a conceptual framework of Strategic Education Blocs (SEBs) defined by three key features: (1) explicit policy coordination across multiple domains affecting international education; (2) preferential treatment for students and researchers from aligned countries; and (3) restrictions on mobility and collaboration with countries perceived as strategic competitors. Based on this framework, we identify three potential alignments emerging, though at varying stages of formalization and with different characteristics:

The Anglo-American bloc, encompassing the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, has intensified coordination through mechanisms such as the Atlantic Declaration Action Plan on a 21st-Century U.S.–U.K. Partnership (June 2023), a new International Education Strategy Forum launched later the same year, and the Five Eyes “trusted research” security protocols. This bloc emphasizes “trusted research” frameworks that facilitate collaboration among allies while restricting engagement with strategic competitors, particularly in sensitive technological fields.

The Sino-Russian bloc is deepened through a series of agreements, including a cooperation accord between their national higher education quality assurance agencies, aiming to align standards and facilitate joint program recognition. The Sino-Russian University Alliance, now comprising over 60 leading institutions, has expanded joint degree offerings and collaborative research. Russia has significantly increased scholarship quotas for African students and is expanding higher education cooperation with both Africa and Central Asia, while China and Russia have taken steps to facilitate student exchanges and academic mobility.

The European bloc, building on the foundation of the European Higher Education Area, has developed more assertive approaches to “strategic autonomy” in research and education through initiatives such as the European Universities Initiative and Horizon Europe’s international cooperation framework. While maintaining openness to global collaboration, this bloc increasingly emphasizes European values and interests in its approach to internationalization.

Potential evidence for these blocs’ strategic coordination can be found in policy documents. For instance, the US-UK Science and Technology Agreement (2017), renewed in 2023, explicitly links research collaboration to shared security interests. The

Sino-Russian Joint Statement on Educational Cooperation (2023) frames educational partnership as part of a broader challenge to “Western hegemony” in knowledge production.

The emergence of these blocs has significant implications for student mobility patterns. Our analysis of recent UNESCO data (2022-2023) shows an increasing concentration of student flows within bloc boundaries, with growth in intra-bloc mobility outpacing overall ISM growth. Chinese student enrollments in Russian universities continued to rise into 2022–2023, contributing to Russia’s record-high international student population. Meanwhile, the number of Chinese students in the United States fell by 4 percent in 2023–2024, and overall international student numbers in the United Kingdom also declined during the same period (UNESCO, 2024).

Middle powers—such as India, Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey—leverage multi-alignment and South–South cooperation to diversify higher education ties. The IBSA Dialogue Forum provides an institutional platform for academic exchanges among India, Brazil, and South Africa. In parallel, Ethiopia’s industrial parks—financed by China, India, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—embed vocational training into regional development (Tran, 2025). India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly foregrounds internationalization through research partnerships and student/faculty exchanges. On the continental level, the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Services legally opens space for cross-border education, while the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016–2025) establishes a ten-year roadmap to strengthen intra-African mobility and capacity building (African Union, 2023).

The multipolar securitization era is also characterized by the normalization of hybrid mobility models combining physical and virtual elements. Universities and governments are developing regulatory frameworks for these new mobility patterns, addressing challenges related to quality assurance, credential recognition, and digital infrastructure (Woodman et al., 2023). These developments are creating more flexible pathways for international education but are also raising concerns about digital divides and the potential stratification of mobility opportunities.

Discussion

This study’s comparative analysis of four eras of international student mobility reveals several significant trends with important implications for theory, policy, and practice in international higher education. Three key findings emerge from our analysis: the increasing complexity of mobility forms, the shifting dynamics of agency and structure, and the growing entanglement of ISM with geopolitical competition.

From Linear to Complex Mobility: Reconceptualizing ISM

Our findings challenge conventional understandings of international student mobility as primarily a physical, unidirectional phenomenon. The evolution from state-sponsored exchanges during the Cold War to today’s hybrid mobility models reflects a fundamental transformation in what constitutes “mobility” in international education.

This transformation necessitates more nuanced theoretical frameworks that can account for virtual, hybrid, and circular mobility patterns alongside traditional degree-seeking relocation.

The concept of “mobility” itself has expanded beyond physical movement to encompass various forms of cross-border educational engagement. Contemporary students may experience internationalization through short-term exchanges, virtual collaborations, offshore campuses, or hybrid programs combining online and in-person elements (Mittelmeier et al., 2021; Woodman et al., 2023). This diversification reflects both technological advancements and changing student preferences, with many learners seeking more flexible and accessible pathways to international education.

This evolution suggests that ISM should be conceptualized not as a single phenomenon but as a spectrum of mobility practices shaped by technological affordances, institutional structures, and individual agency. Future research should explore how different mobility forms interact and complement each other, potentially creating more inclusive and sustainable approaches to internationalization.

Agency and Structure in ISM: Towards a Structuration Perspective

Our historical analysis reveals complex interactions between structural forces and stakeholder agency across different eras of ISM. While early scholarship often emphasized either structural determinants (through push-pull models) or individual agency (through student choice frameworks), our findings suggest that a structuration perspective better captures the dynamic interplay between these elements.

Drawing on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, we argue that ISM patterns reflect the mutual constitution of structure and agency, with stakeholders both shaped by and shaping the structural contexts in which they operate. Students exercise agency within constraints imposed by visa policies, financial resources, and geopolitical tensions, while their collective choices gradually reshape institutional practices and policy frameworks. Similarly, universities develop internationalization strategies in response to national policies and market conditions, while simultaneously influencing these structures through advocacy and innovation.

This perspective helps explain the observed variations in how similar structural changes—such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the rise of digital platforms—have affected different regions and student populations. The agency of students, institutions, and governments in responding to these changes has produced diverse outcomes rather than uniform effects, highlighting the importance of contextual factors and stakeholder capabilities.

It is important to note that our data on student flows and policy developments provides indirect, rather than direct, evidence of student agency. While we can observe the outcomes of student decisions in aggregate mobility patterns, individual decision-making processes and experiences remain underexplored in our analysis. Future research employing qualitative methods could provide valuable insights into how students navigate and potentially reshape the structural conditions of international education.

ISM as Strategic Statecraft: Beyond Soft Power

Our analysis of the multipolar securitization era suggests that ISM is increasingly functioning as a form of strategic statecraft rather than merely as a market phenomenon or soft power tool. The emergence of Strategic Education Blocs represents a qualitative shift in how governments approach international education, moving beyond traditional soft power concepts to more explicitly instrumental approaches linking educational exchange to economic security, technological competition, and geopolitical alignment.

This conceptualization differs from previous literature on soft power (Nye, 2004) in several important ways. While soft power frameworks emphasize attraction and persuasion through cultural and educational exchange, the strategic statecraft approach we observe incorporates elements of both soft and hard power, using educational policies as tools for alliance-building, talent acquisition, and technological advancement. International education is increasingly embedded in broader national security strategies rather than treated as a separate domain of cultural diplomacy.

Evidence for this shift can be found in policy documents such as the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act (2021), which explicitly links international student recruitment to technological competition with China, and the European Commission's Global Approach to Research and Innovation (2021), which introduces the concept of "open strategic autonomy" in knowledge production. These approaches reflect a more instrumental view of ISM as a mechanism for advancing national interests in an era of intensified geopolitical competition.

While the evolution from state-directed to market-oriented and now to strategically coordinated mobility suggests increasing diversification of power, critical examination reveals persistent inequities. Throughout these eras, international students have consistently been positioned as subjects rather than as agents of mobility governance, caught between competing national interests and geopolitical tensions.

The Strategic Education Blocs, while ostensibly representing a more distributed power structure, may actually reinforce systemic advantages for dominant knowledge economies while limiting opportunities for students from regions outside these emerging blocs. This reframes ISM not merely as a beneficial exchange or market transaction, but as a contested space where geopolitical interests and knowledge hierarchies continue to shape who moves, where they move, and under what conditions this movement occurs.

This strategic turn raises important questions about the future of international education as a space for cross-cultural understanding and global cooperation. As mobility patterns increasingly align with bloc boundaries, there is a risk of knowledge fragmentation and reduced opportunities for collaboration across geopolitical divides. Universities and scholars committed to global engagement must navigate these tensions, balancing national security considerations with the cosmopolitan values traditionally associated with internationalization.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our findings have several implications for policymakers, institutional leaders, and practitioners in international education:

Governments and regional bodies should develop comprehensive regulatory frameworks for hybrid and virtual mobility, addressing issues such as credential

recognition, quality assurance, and student support services. These frameworks should be flexible enough to accommodate technological innovation while ensuring educational quality and student protections.

Universities should pursue strategic diversification in their internationalization efforts, reducing dependence on single markets and developing partnerships across different education blocs. This approach can mitigate geopolitical risks while creating more resilient and inclusive mobility pathways. Despite the growing strategic importance of ISM, policies and programs should remain centered on student needs and experiences. This includes addressing barriers to mobility related to financial resources, visa restrictions, and digital divides, as well as providing comprehensive support services for international students.

As ISM becomes increasingly entangled with geopolitical competition, stakeholders should develop ethical frameworks for internationalization that balance strategic interests with commitments to academic freedom, cross-cultural dialogue, and global cooperation on shared challenges. Middle powers and Global South countries should leverage their unique positions to develop distinctive approaches to internationalization that serve their specific development needs while maintaining strategic flexibility in an era of bloc competition.

Conclusion

This study has traced the evolution of international student mobility across four distinct eras, from the ideological competition of the Cold War to today's multipolar securitization landscape. Our analysis reveals how ISM has been transformed by shifting geopolitical contexts, technological developments, and changing power dynamics among stakeholders. The emergence of Strategic Education Blocs and the growing agency of middle powers represent significant developments that are reshaping global mobility patterns and governance structures.

These findings contribute to international higher education scholarship by providing a comprehensive historical framework for understanding ISM's evolution, introducing the concept of Strategic Education Blocs as an analytical tool and advancing a structuration perspective on the interplay between agency and structure in mobility processes. By situating contemporary developments within their historical context, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how ISM functions as both an educational phenomenon and a form of strategic statecraft.

As international education navigates the tensions of the multipolar securitization era, stakeholders must balance competing priorities: maintaining openness and collaboration across geopolitical divides while addressing legitimate security concerns; leveraging digital technologies to expand access while ensuring quality and inclusion; and pursuing strategic objectives while remaining centered on student needs and experiences. Navigating these tensions will require thoughtful policy approaches, institutional innovation, and continued scholarly attention to the complex dynamics shaping international student mobility in the 21st century.

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Appendix A

This appendix provides a non-exhaustive list of significant policy documents, agreements, and strategies relevant to the evolution of international student mobility (ISM) across the four eras discussed in the article. Documents are organized chronologically within each era and include brief annotations highlighting their relevance.

Era 1: Cold War (1945-1989)

This era was characterized by state-sponsored mobility driven by ideological competition and diplomatic objectives.

- Fulbright Act of 1946 (United States)
- Soviet Scholarship Programs (e.g., Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University established 1960) (Soviet Union)
- Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP) (Established 1959) (Commonwealth Nations)
- Bilateral Cultural Exchange Agreements (Various Countries)

Era 2: Market Liberalization (1990-2008)

Following the Cold War, this era saw the rise of globalization, market principles in higher education, and dominance by Anglo-American destinations.

- General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Effective 1995) (World Trade Organization)
- Australian Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000 (Australia)
- UK Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) for International Education (Launched 1999, expanded 2006) (United Kingdom)
- Bologna Declaration (1999) and Subsequent Bologna Process Communiqués (European Higher Education Area)
- OECD/UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education (2005)

Era 3: Strategic Competition (2009-2022)

Marked by rising multipolarity, economic nationalism, diversification of destinations, and increasing securitization of ISM.

- UK Tier 4 Student Visa System Changes (Implemented 2012) (United Kingdom)
- Canadian Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP) Reforms (Ongoing, significant changes around 2008-2014) (Canada)
- China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Scholarship Program (Launched ~2013) (China)
- Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) (Malaysia)
- Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100 (2013-2020) (Russia)
- US Presidential Proclamation 10043 (Effective 2020) (United States)
- UK Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) (Ongoing, scope expanded over time) (United Kingdom)
- ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Programme (Ongoing)

Era 4: Multipolar Securitization (2023-Present)

Characterized by the formation of strategic blocs, intensified technological competition, and the normalization of hybrid mobility.

- US CHIPS and Science Act (2022) (United States)
- European Commission's Global Approach to Research and Innovation (2021) (European Union)
- US-UK Statement on Science and Technology Cooperation (2023)
- Sino-Russian Joint Statement on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era (Including Education Cooperation Agreements, e.g., 2023) (China & Russia)
- India National Education Policy 2020 (India)
- African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25, successor planned) & Protocol to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement relating to Trade in Services (Including Education)
- National Research Security Policies (Various Countries, e.g., Canada's Policy on Sensitive Technology Research and Affiliations of Concern, 2024)