

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

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Volume 38, Issue 1, pp. 138-166

DOI: [10.36366/frontiers.v38i1.1128](https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v38i1.1128)

www.frontiersjournal.org



Socio-cultural integration of international students in Europe: A systematic review

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Abstract

International student mobility (ISM) has gained increasing importance in the last decades, while the integration of international students remains a key area of research in the literature. This systematic review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural integration of international students in Europe by examining how transnational mobility influences the socialization among students, what factors influence and hinder social and cultural integration during ISM. Following the application of exclusion criteria, a total of 103 articles retrieved from six databases were analysed. Findings reveal that while ISM fosters cross-cultural interactions, various factors, such as institutional support, language proficiency, and social networks, play a crucial role in shaping integration experiences. Challenges such as discrimination, cultural distance, and limited engagement with host communities can hinder effective integration. By synthesizing existing research, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of international student integration, offering insights for future studies and institutional policies. Additionally, the review provides recommendations for higher education institutions to enhance their support systems, promote inclusive campus environments, and develop strategies to facilitate the successful integration of international students.

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Keywords

Europe; incoming students; international student mobility; socio-cultural integration; systematic review

1. Introduction

International student mobility (ISM) has received increasing policy and research attention in recent years (e.g., Beech, 2017; Yang, 2022). ISM is defined by the European Parliament and Council (2006, p. 8) as “a period of learning abroad (formal and non-formal), or mobility undertaken by individual young people or adults, for the purposes of formal and non-formal learning and for their personal and professional development.” There are more than 6.4 million international students crossing borders for higher education in 2020 (OECD, 2021; Zhao & Harji, 2024). Furthermore, several countries implement proactive student policies to attract international students (OECD, 2019). Nations, higher education institutions and individuals – students and staff stakeholders of the universities - have political, economic, academic and socio-cultural rationales for ISM (Knight, 2006). Among them, the socio-cultural rationale which is the main topic of this paper focus on developing knowledge and skills in intercultural relations and communications (Knight, 1999). The substantial movement of students has been driven by various factors, including globalisation, enhanced career opportunities, and personal development (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

Within ISM, the social and cultural integration of international students remains a crucial challenge for countries and institutions hosting students. Especially because social and cultural integration prospects seem to have major impact on international students’ decision to study in a foreign country (Gutema et al., 2023). Integration is understood to mean a sense of belonging and feeling comfortable and content both in class and on campus (Huyen, 2015). Social and cultural integration of international students refers to the process which involves the adaptation of students to their host country and building up meaningful connections within their community (Rivas et al., 2019). In other words, sociocultural adaptation is defined as the ability to fit in, to acquire culturally appropriate skills and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment (Ward & Kennedy, 1999), or alternatively as the harmony and compatibility between the individual and their social environment (Tinto, 1975). More specifically, social integration in international students deals with the adjustment process by which individuals adapt and foster social connections, become a part of a community, and create a rapport that enables them to navigate in their host institution and country while feeling a sense of belonging and social connectedness (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Rivas et al., 2019). Cultural

integration refers to the process through which international students from different backgrounds try to learn, understand, adapt, and be involved in the cultural atmosphere of their host country (Tran & Pham, 2016).

Murphy-Lejeune (2002) conceptualizes adaptation as a positive yet flexible adjustment that enhances one's ability to function in a new environment, where international students, rather than fully adopting the host culture or altering their identity, aim to feel sufficiently comfortable to live temporarily while either blending harmoniously like a chameleon or, conversely, choosing withdrawal and limited engagement with the host community.

Conversely, socio-cultural adaptation and integration are not straightforward processes for all mobile students, as various challenges often impede their social and cultural integration within the host country and institution. Challenges such as language and cultural differences can complicate living in the new country. Linguistic challenges involve the study and usage of English or local language skills (Köylü & Tracy-Ventura, 2022), but challenges occur in career development and personal growth levels as well (Beech, 2017; Brooks & Waters, 2022; Choudaha & Chang, 2012). Moreover, one prominent challenge is the limited contact with host communities, which often results in forming their own student tribes with other internationals and co-nationals thereby restricting opportunities for deeper cultural immersion (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2014). In addition, pre-departure factors such as language proficiency and mental well-being significantly hinder students' capacity for successful adaptation abroad (Köylü & Bulut-Sahin, 2025). Current research enriches our understanding of the ISM phenomenon with a mosaic of perspectives and experiences that helped understand the social and cultural integration of these students in various contexts (e.g., Campos et al., 2022; Durkin, 2008; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

Reducing the challenges to international students' social and cultural integration is crucial, as successful integration brings significant benefits to three key stakeholders: the host countries, the home countries, and the students themselves. Host countries benefit from the cultural diversity and economic contributions brought by international students, with for example their local spending boosting the economy (e.g., OECD, 2021). On the other hand, home countries may experience brain drain, a systemic migration of well-educated individuals who move to work and live abroad, but could also benefit if students return with enhanced skills and knowledge gained abroad, such as contributing to the home country's workforce with advanced expertise, fostering innovation and economic growth, and potentially influencing social and cultural development through their experiences abroad (OECD, 2021). Moreover,

returning students may serve as bridges between their home countries and the global community, facilitating international collaborations and partnerships that further benefit their societies (Adisa et al., 2019). The economic contributions, personal growth, and professional development underscore the importance of supporting their integration (Beine et al., 2016).

This research aimed to investigate international students in Europe since ISM has become a cornerstone of higher education in Europe, contributing significantly to cultural exchange, academic enrichment, and the internationalization of universities. However, the social integration and adaptation processes of international students, both short-term exchange participants and long-term degree-seeking students, remain complex and multifaceted (Marcu, 2020). As ISM continues to grow, fostering an environment that supports their socio-cultural integration will be essential to maximising the benefits for both students and host countries (Young, 2022b). This review includes the publications conducted with international students studying in Europe, a popular study abroad destination for credit- and degree-seeking students (Sahin et al., 2024). Despite the breadth of research, and a recent review on the impact of COVID-19 on the social and cultural integration of international students (Sin et al., 2025), there remains a need for a comprehensive synthesis of these findings in order to better understand the dynamics of international students' social and cultural integration.

By systematically reviewing the literature, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing international students' social and cultural integration, the barriers they face, and the implications for policy and practice in higher education. In this study international students are understood as individuals who move from their country of origin to another country for educational purposes (Wang et al., 2024) regardless of the length of their stay (short or long) or type of their mobility (credit or degree). Besides investigating international students' social and cultural integration, this study also explores the broader socio-cultural adaptation process, including the challenges and opportunities they encounter, providing a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Such insights are crucial for designing institutional strategies that foster inclusive and supportive academic environments, benefiting both international and local students. The following research questions were investigated by this review:

1. How does transnational mobility shape and affect socialisation among students in the host country?
2. What mechanisms shape students' social and cultural integration during international student mobility?
3. What factors hinder social and cultural integration during ISM?

2. Methodology

2.1. Search process

This review utilized the PRISMA methodology, a standardized guideline system to systematically analyse the existing literature in a transparent and unbiased manner (Moher et al., 2009). A systematic and extensive literature search focusing on the dynamics of international students' social and cultural integration was undertaken using six international online databases: ERIC, ProQuest, Web of Science, Linguistic and Language Behaviour, Scopus Elsevier and PsycInfo. The predefined keywords were based on the aims of the literature review. Keywords combinations are included in Table (1).

TABLE (1)
KEYWORDS USED FOR SYSTEMATIC SEARCH

("sojourner" OR "international mobility" OR "international student mobility" OR "study abroad" OR "international students" OR "mobile students" OR "foreign students" OR "Erasmus students" OR "exchange students" OR "transnational mobility" OR "transnational students" OR "student mobility")	AND ("social integration" OR "cultural integration" OR "sociocultural integration")	AND ("social adaptation" OR "cultural adaptation" OR "sociocultural adaptation" OR "intercultural adaptation").
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A total of 2,518 articles were initially identified through the keyword search. After removing duplicates, 2,177 articles remained, which were then categorized into different fields of study (see Table 2 for the distribution of articles across databases). We are aware that such systematic search of databases implies certain research barriers, as databases and keyword strategies might prioritize research emanating from certain countries. This review focuses specifically on Europe.

TABLE (2)
DATABASES OF INTERNATIONAL JOURNALS OF A BROAD GENERAL SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Database	Count
ERIC	557
ProQuest	467
Web of Science	472
Linguistic and Language Behaviour	95
PsycInfo	478
Scopus Elsevier	106
Unclassified	2
Total	2,177

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

For further analysis, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was utilised to facilitate the process. Only (1) non-COVID related studies were included (2) between the period of 1978 and 2023, the beginning of the period reflects the launch of the Erasmus Programme. Only (3) incoming students to EU Member States¹ and Associated Third Countries² were involved, and (4) both degree- and non-degree-seeking students were examined. Lastly, (5) international students studying in non-European countries and (6) virtual mobility studies were excluded from the review.

2.3. The process of identifying relevant studies

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the selection process, the review and screening were conducted by at least two researchers, each of whom examined the full text of every article and applied the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A third researcher was involved in case of a dispute, and the article in question was discussed by the three researchers. The process of reviewing and scanning led to the exclusion of 1,722 papers from the corpus. A total of 455 papers fit the inclusion criteria and categorized into five discipline categories as presented in Table (3) below. Papers not falling under any of the specific categories below were included in the ‘mixed’ category.

TABLE (3)

CATEGORIES OF THE ARTICLES IN THE FINAL CORPUS OF THE BROAD GENERAL SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Categories	Count
Educational Science	162
Psychology	103
Sociology	97
Applied Linguistics	84
Mixed	9
Total	455

This paper focuses exclusively on research categorized under Educational Sciences, initially comprising 162 articles. Following a second round of screening, additional articles were excluded due to reasons such as insufficient relevance to the research focus, in addition to the removal of duplicates. As a result, the final number of articles included in the Educational

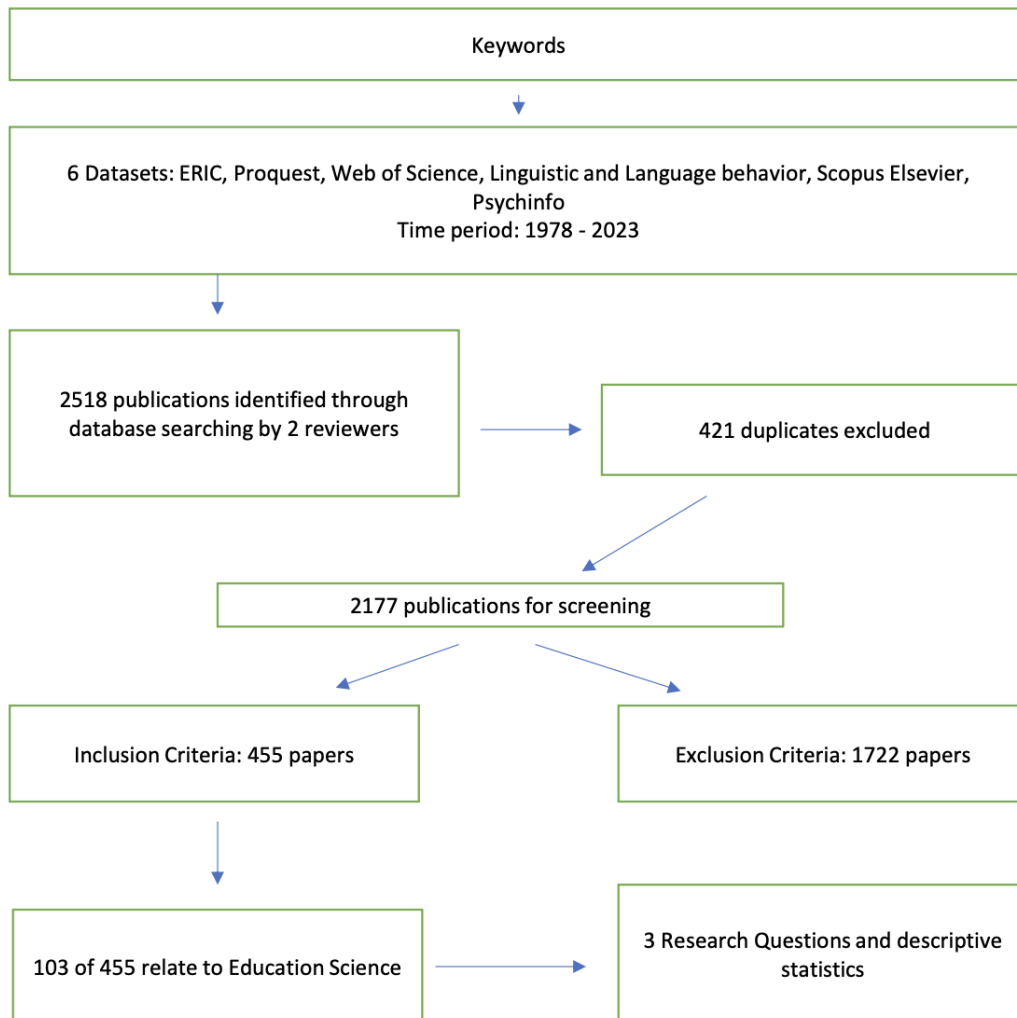
¹ EU Members (27 countries): Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

² Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Turkey.

Sciences category is 103. The Prisma multi-stage process of our research is shown in Figure (1).

FIGURE (1)

THE PRISMA MULTI-STAGE PROCESS



In this review, the findings are first presented through descriptive analysis. The descriptive component of the review covers the following aspects of the articles: sample size and study design, destination and sending countries, country membership, host country programme type, and type of mobility. In addition, the articles were also analysed in relation to three research questions using thematic analysis.

3. Descriptive results

3.1. Study design and sample size

Of the 103 articles, mixed-method designs (utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods) were used in 21, quantitative designs (focusing on

studies that evaluate numeric proficiency scores) in 28 and qualitative designs (with their focus on analysing in-depth insights) in 54. The number of participants in quantitative studies varied between 18 and 1375. In the mixed studies, this figure varied between 7 and 501. In the qualitative studies, the number of participants ranged between 1 and 127. The total number of participants reported was 12043. Overall, 101 of the 103 studies in the corpus reported the actual sample size. Only 38 of these 103 studies reported the variable *gender*, with a majority of female participants (n = 5630) while 3887 male participants were reported. In the quantitative studies, pre-test-post-test studies were mainly observed. Most mixed-method studies were studies that started with quantitative and continued with qualitative designs (n = 21). Ethnographic studies, case studies and phenomenological studies were at the forefront of qualitative studies.

3.2. Destination and sending countries

Regarding the study abroad destination and sending countries, an extensive analysis was made. In total, 28 destination countries were mentioned, with the frequency of mentions as follows: United Kingdom (35^[1]), Spain (10), Germany (8) and the Netherlands (7), Italy (7), Turkey (7), France, (5), Portugal (5), Sweden (4), Ireland (4), Czech Republic (3), Finland (3), Poland (3), Switzerland (3), Denmark(2), Norway (2), Belgium (1), Latvia (1), Ukraine (1).

The origin of the incoming students was indicated as: China (24), USA (20), Turkey (11), Spain (9), Germany (8), India (7), Canada (6), Indonesia (6), Romania (6), The Netherlands (6), Brazil (5), Poland (5), Belgium (4), Ethiopia (4), Iran (4), Italy (4), Malaysia (4), Mexico (4), United Kingdom (4), Lithuania (4). Then, Albania, Bulgaria, Colombia, France, Nigeria, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand were mentioned in three papers altogether. Afghanistan, Austria, Bosnia, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal, Peru, Slovakia, Sweden, Slovenia, Syria, Taiwan, Ukraine, Vietnam, Zambia were mentioned in two papers. Argentina, Arab Emirates, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belgium, Belarus, Chile, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hong-Kong, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Latvia, Libya, Madagascar, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Singapore,, Slovak Republic, Somalia, Surinam, Tobago and Trinidad, Turkmenistan, Venezuela, Yemen, New Zealand were mentioned only once.

In some papers regions were mentioned instead of countries, e.g., Africa (7), Middle East (5), Europe (3), Eastern Europe (1), Western Europe (1), Caucasus (1), Far East (1) (Asia (1), Central Asia (1) North America (1) Non-European (1). In addition, some studies described the sending countries as various (10), mixed (6) or different (4).

3.3. Country Membership

In terms of country membership, 54 of the articles take EU countries as their destination, given that the aim of the systematic review was that the articles should be located in the European context or area of influence, and 37 do so with the UK (one of the main destinations for international students). There are also articles from associated third countries, mainly Turkey (7) and Norway (2), in addition to 2 articles referring to Switzerland. Finally, there are several articles (4) that consider destinations shared between EU countries and the UK.

Among those articles with the EU as a destination, 15 have students from other EU countries as their origin, while 16 of the articles focus on students from the US ($n = 9$) or China ($n = 7$). For those articles with the UK as a destination, 40% ($n = 15$) have students from China as the main study group.

The countries and contexts in which the research is conducted show the central and hegemonic role of a set of countries of origin and destination based on their numeric appearance in the studies examined. Although the UK already plays a central role in these publications, the EU must pay attention to attract more students from Asian countries, especially China.

3.4. Host country program type (according to level of education)

In the systematic review, the host country program types in international education displayed variety in the 103 articles at hand. The programs primarily included 30 bachelor's and 21 master's level courses, with additional 1 postgraduate and 1 certificate and 6 other programs. Several programs were mixed, involving students from different academic stages (18), fostering cross-disciplinary learning and cultural exchange. Specific exchange initiatives are also highlighted, illustrating bilateral academic collaborations. In these articles, the Erasmus program was notably present, with 12 Erasmus students, supporting student mobility within Europe. Additionally, unique programs like a cohort-based Spanish language education and a five-year integrated bachelor's/master's teacher education program further showcased the adaptability of host countries. However, it was important to note that some entries did not specify the type of program (10), indicating a need for more comprehensive data collection in future studies. This variety in program types reflected the host countries' ability to accommodate the diverse educational needs of international students, from short-term exchanges to full-degree pursuits. These offerings not only broaden academic horizons but also may foster rich intercultural dialogue, essential for global competence in today's interconnected world. Host countries thus play a crucial role in promoting the internationalisation of higher education through these diverse program types.

3.5. Type of mobility

Degree-seeking students, characterised by pursuing a full academic qualification abroad, constituted the most prevalent group, with 38 articles dedicated to their experiences. Credit mobility, during which students earn credits towards their home institution's degree while studying at the university abroad, was also well represented, reflected in 20 articles. Among those, seven articles specifically examined ERASMUS+ exchange students, a prominent European credit mobility program initiated by the European Parliament and Council. An additional ten papers explored students' experiences as mixed, which integrate both degree and credit mobility elements. However, it is noteworthy that 36 of the 103 articles did not explicitly specify the student profile, hindering the categorization of their mobility experience. This observation underscores the necessity for further research to elucidate the diverse pathways undertaken by students seeking international educational opportunities.

4. Thematic analysis

4.1. Influence of ISM on socialization among students

With the first research question, the articles analysed the literature on how universities tackle the socialisation of mobile students during their study abroad. First, most publications revealed that international students who have participated in physical mobility programs encounter not only the host university and academic environment but also the socio-cultural environment of the host country.

Among the reviewed articles, many scholars (Brown, 2009; Gondra & Czerwionka, 2018; Li & Pitkanen, 2018; Peet et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2019; Taylor & Ali, 2017) agree that international students have increased their knowledge and awareness about other cultures. Gondra and Czerwionka (2018) explain that they learn about other cultures through socialisation, which is mostly possible through daily activities like gastronomy, language, music, sports, etc. Peet et al. (2015) argue that students who participate in study abroad programs improve their communication skills, cultural self-awareness, and empathy, which are crucial for effective socialisation. Similarly, Li (2017) found out that the international students who managed to socialise with the local students had the chance to improve their local language and had better academic achievements.

Moreover, most publications among the systematically reviewed articles (Blankvoort et al., 2019; Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2018; Rienties et al., 2012, Sobkowiak, 2019; Sweeney, 2017; Wang et al., 2012) agree that social relations with local and international students are one of the main elements of

socialisation. The social interaction of international and local students leads to the development of cosmopolitan competences, i.e. cultural and social abilities enabling students to navigate work, life and studies abroad, (Moskal & Scheweisfurth, 2018), and students develop a global identity (Wang, 2022a) or translanguaging identities (Wang, 2022b). Blankvoort et al. (2019) argued that social relations with other students are more important, especially in short-term mobility programs. For an effective socialization, Taylor & Ali (2017) explained that the students break their home country friendship, and they need a micro social support system in the host country. However, as Brown (2009) explains, international students' social relations are limited with local students compared to their relations with the other international students.

There are several factors affecting socialisation among international students including the efficiency of using English as a lingua franca (McGarvey et al., 2021, Peterson et al., 2019; Rębisz & Grygiel, 2018), their original home culture environment like the differences between Asian and Western students (Hernández Lopez, 2020; Marcu, 2020; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013); their personal attribute towards different cultures (Brown, 2009; Zhang et al, 2010); their age (Eynullayeva et al, 2021), gender (Boynuegri & Sener, 2021), economic positions (Li, 2020) and host language proficiency (McGarvey et al., 2021).

Institutional level enablers for socialization were also discussed in the reviewed literature. Pederson (2010) stated that socialisation among international and local students is an urgent need and brings benefits; therefore, institutions should also develop mechanisms to make this socialisation possible. Some studies (Elliot et al., 2016; Ragavan, 2014; Schwieter et al., 2021; Sierra- Hueado, et al., 2017) highlighted those interventions made by the institutions positively affected the socialisation process. Farrelly and Murphy (2018) emphasise that it is not wise to wait for this social interaction to emerge naturally, instead, student clubs, students, and the institutions should support unions. Ragavan (2014) explains the positive role of mentoring policies in international students' integration. Similar to that, Pang (2020) offers to use social networking sites as digital communication platforms for cross-cultural socialisation. In other words, universities should provide multicultural environments for these students (Iorga et al., 2020) and they have to develop systematic policies and procedures for multiculturalism, equity and diversity, such as supporting intercultural events, support services for international students or diversity-oriented recruitment procedures (Flateland et al., 2019).

Moreover, the international and local students interact in different forms of social relations (Zimmerman, 2017). However, some of the publications (Cheng & Adeloka, 2022; Li, 2017; Wang et al., 2012) found that socialisation with other international students is much easier and preferable than socialisation

with local students. Wang et al (2012) explained that although at the beginning they prefer the mixed group of different nations; they might prefer to only be with their nationals during the semester, due to lacking confidence and language proficiency. Similarly, Cheng and Adeloka (2022) explained the reason for communicating with co-nationals as they perceive some unkindness from non-co-nationals which negatively affect their confidence to communicate with the other nationals. The same finding was mentioned by Li (2017) stating that the Erasmus students did not report any locals when they were asked about their friendship network.

4.2. Factors influencing social and cultural integration during ISM

The main pattern that has been observed involved influencing factors on different levels. The factors are categorized as personal factors, pre-departure experiences and mobility period experiences. Some factors affecting social and cultural integration are personal factors These involve geographical location, i.e. the strong link between intercultural knowledge growth and minority host context environment (Gondra & Czerwionka, 2018), living expenses of the chosen country and city, i.e. the lack of affordable accommodation and high cost of living emerged as a practical issue for international students (Farrelly & Murphy, 2018), economic development (higher scholarship and paid internships) and academic surroundings (intimidating selection procedures and interviews) (Juškevičienė et al., 2022). Moreover, nationality (international students have higher scores in intercultural effectiveness survey than local students) (Avçılar & Gök, 2021), financial capabilities of the student (Li, 2020), and their status (e.g., migrant status) allows special entry, which might further initiate social and cultural integration.

During their mobility period, international students' integration could be affected by several additional factors. Among others, Rienties et al. (2012) stated that individual factors play a crucial role in the successful integration of international students. For example, different personalities and characteristics of individuals can determine the success of integration (Bergman et al., 2022; Eynullayeva et al., 2021). Having intrinsic motivation, curiosity, anticipation of benefits (Blankvoort et al., 2019), fitting personality traits (Zhang et al., 2010), and clear personal goals during international student mobility (Zimmermann et al., 2017) affects integration positively. Previous study abroad experience also shapes the integration process, which could be highly dependent on the preceding one's nature (Aladegbaiye et al., 2022). It was also shown that the language proficiency of the students (Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2018), the ability to understand accents, and the willingness of local students to engage with international ones influence the integration of students (Adisa et al., 2019).

Moreover, the adaptation patterns are different for those travelling alone to study abroad compared to the ones going with a group, and differences in terms of gender can also be observed, as overall, males showed significantly higher assimilation scores measured by the acculturation scale than females (Boynuegri & Sener, 2021).

The literature revealed pre-departure experiences affecting the social and cultural integration of students during international student mobility (ISM). It was revealed that pre-departure preparation of students for the new learning environment (Peet et al., 2015) and learning about the differences between the academic systems of the home and host country in advance (Adisa et al., 2019) could ease the integration. Additionally, the time spent by students to study the host country and its language pre-departure helps with immersion (Schartner, 2014), otherwise stress and anxiety can precede the study-abroad process (Iorga et al., 2020).

Additionally, institutional factors also affect the social and cultural integration of international students during stay. One of the most prominent influencing variables is the program features, such as duration (Gondra & Czerwionka, 2018), the availability of scholarships (Juškevičienė et al., 2022), existing legal and bureaucratic hurdles (Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2018), the presence of mixed-ethnicity classes, program planning and design and program execution to fit intercultural learning purposes and ease integration (Tarchi et al., 2019). Besides these, class size influences how much each culture can immerse themselves into the new one, especially if cultural differences would result in different in-class behaviour (Cheng & Adekola, 2022). Further, the adaptation to new pedagogical styles (Pedersen, 2010; Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2018) could be challenging to some. Therefore, pedagogical interventions before and after the study abroad process (Schwieter et al., 2021), the application of new teaching and learning methods and approaches, such as self-reflection (Sierra-Huedo et al., 2017) could help the integration process. Even though geographical isolation of international students can occur due to the location of the dormitory resulting in further social and cultural isolation (Rębisz & Grygiel, 2018), the university administration has powerful tools to help the immersion of students. Staff development is needed to design and run international study programs, while acknowledging the cultural diversity in the curriculum (Flateland et al., 2019) and running intercultural communication programs (Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Moreover, the implementation of orientation days and establishment of international offices could also ease students' integration processes (Yilmaz et al., 2020). The development of a mentor and mentee program for international students can further help with integration (Ragavan, 2014). Moreover, existing student communities (e.g., Erasmus Student Network) were revealed to have a significant role in the social and cultural integration of

international students (Yu & Moskal, 2019), similarly to organised events where international students can discuss their experiences, fears and the causes of their anxiety (Pitts, 2009).

Moreover, social factors were determined to affect the social and cultural integration of international students. It was found that having close friends from different cultures and having the opportunity to have face-to-face contact with locals enhances perceived social connectedness (Avcılar & Gök, 2021). The ability to speak the language (either English or the local language) is a significant factor for making friends (Eynullayeva et al., 2021), while effective communication enhances in-class group work success (Bergman, 2022). Exposure to activities involving the local community (e.g., volunteering, social networking events) (Wang, 2022a) and interacting with locals of the country (Sobkowiak, 2019) enhances integration, while prejudices and biases (Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2018) could be tackled. Most recently, social media surfaced as an effective tool for integration, as it was found that support from home and host countries via social media channels (Pang, 2020) and the overall usage of social media can help with integration (Hofhuis et al., 2019).

Lastly, the review found several cultural factors affecting the social and cultural integration of international students. Sociocultural knowledge or the lack thereof were found to influence early adaptation abilities of students (Hernández López, 2020). The exposure to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the region (Gondra & Czerwionka, 2018; Blankvoort et al., 2019), experiencing cultural differences (Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2018) and the ability to use the lingua franca among the community members for communication (Li & Pitkänen, 2018) highly affects integration. The ability to practise religious beliefs (McGarvey et al., 2021) and immersing in organised activities (e.g., local tours, cultural events) help with cultural immersion (Zhang et al., 2019) and gaining intercultural experiences (Unlu, 2015). Besides the length of exposure to the other cultures (Avcılar & Gök, 2021), the availability of cultural assistants to students helps integration (Noom-ura, 2017). These cultural assistants are volunteer Canadian university students who are looking for international friends and they help as big brothers joining in students' conversations in another language so that they can quickly switch into an English conversation.

As seen based on the above, during ISM (international student mobility), students gain immense social and cultural experience they could utilise after returning to their home countries. The literature review has also revealed several factors affecting the social and cultural integration of students with the help of those already returning. Returnees to home country can be acknowledged by policymakers as having transnational identities (i.e.: being characterised by a 'self-in-between mobility', seeking compromises and

connections between the polar extremes of essentialist and non-essentialist approaches to identity” Wang, 2022, p.1), which could reinforce further collaboration between the nations at hand and would serve as a promotion for long-term succession of international student exchanges (Wang, 2022a). Moreover, students’ satisfaction after returning to their home countries and its outcomes (e.g., word-of-mouth recommendations to peers) can serve as a tool for promoting international student mobility (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991). On the other hand, lack of socialization or adaptation might affect the general perception in a negative way of studying abroad among the students.

4.3. Factors hindering social and cultural integration during ISM

The systematic review revealed that the two most significant barriers affecting the socio-cultural adaptation of international students are language difficulties and the reluctance of local students to include international peers in their social groups. Other influencing factors include heavy academic workloads, homesickness due to strong ties with family and friends back home, personality traits such as low levels of openness, and institutional issues like lack of support services and bureaucratic hurdles.

The most prevalent barrier for international students in terms of social and cultural integration among the studies reviewed was language proficiency. This was even true, as Pitt’s (2009) study reveals, for students with most advanced language skills in the target language. Students were reported to struggle in situations in which the local language was dominant and students’ language skills were insufficient and thus excluded them. As Rębisz and Grygiel (2018) and Iorga et al. (2020) have argued, this can lead to fear, anxiety, and stress. To put it differently, the higher the students’ language skills the less stress they experience, which is beneficial for their well-being and overall experience of their stay. This leads Abrar et al. (2023) to the conclusion that students should obtain a relatively high proficiency in the host country’s language before departure to minimise stressful experiences and maximise successful interactions with peers in the local language. Sobkowiak (2019) on the other hand concludes that English as a lingua franca should be taught at all educational levels to prepare students for intercultural communication and international mobility. In fact, Peet et al. (2015) and van Oorschot (2014) found that language barriers were especially high when English was not the primary language used as a lingua franca among students so that everyone could participate in the conversation inside and outside of the classroom. As McGarvey et al. (2021) and Peterson et al. (2019) reported, communication with peers from the host culture was perceived as difficult since students were unable to understand certain local accents or vocabulary, which became even more problematic if one cultural background was more dominant within the student group than others. This finding is backed up by Barrow’s (2023) study,

in which language barriers are seen as limitations contributing to students' feeling as a minority due to the exposure to a dominant language other than their own.

At the same time, relying on English as a lingua franca throughout the study abroad experience for interpersonal communication with local and other international students or academic tasks interfered with students' learning of the local language(s) (e.g., Noom-ura, 2017). Linked to this is the second most prevalent factor limiting students' social and cultural integration: the make-up of groups and the (perceived) division between international students or those of the same linguistic/cultural background and the local student population, referred to by van Oorschot (2014) as 'monocultural groups-ghettoization' (see also McGarvey et al., 2021; Li, 2017; Schartner, 2014). As McKinley et al. (2019) argue, it is up to universities to provide more opportunities for intercultural interaction and exchange among and within diverse social groups. Given the importance of group formation and dynamics for students' integration, Wang et al. (2012) advocate for more research and lament the fact that such homogenization of groups happens to the detriment of mutual understanding and learning about different languages and cultures. At the same time, being surrounded by peers from the same/similar linguistic and cultural background was also considered a relief by international students for fear of and/or experiences with discrimination/racism (Aladegbaiye et al., 2022; Brown, 2009; Rohrllich & Martin, 1991).

Finally, other barriers included heavy workload, strong ties with family and friends back home/homesickness, personality traits such as low levels of openness, ethnocentric reactions, high number of international students in classes, lack of support services, and bureaucracy. As the reviewed studies suggest, many of these barriers and limitations can be alleviated by improved communication either in the local language or English as a lingua franca, from which both international students and the host institution can benefit.

5. Discussion

As "one of the greatest mass movements" of humankind (Maslen, 2014), international student mobility is a service purchase, in which the fulfilment of expectations might be under great influence of the students' social and cultural integration processes. Besides affecting the satisfaction level with the experience, socialisation can even affect students' retention or dropout decisions. That is why this study is aiming to paint a picture of how international mobility students and local students socialise in the host culture is prominent with its evidence providing a holistic understanding. The primary finding of this review reveals that international students encounter not only the host

university and academic environment but also the socio-cultural environment of the host country, and international studentship experience improve their knowledge and awareness about the host culture in various ways and develop their cosmopolitan competences. In fact, the cultural distance between the home and the host country is commonly underlined as an important variable in the models explaining the motivations behind students' purchase decisions (e.g., Hemsley-Brown, 2001). However, during students' prior research before arrival to the host country, culture is an inevitably intangible phenomenon that after their arrival turns into a reality needed to be interpreted and evaluated every second (Sweeney, 2017). Intangibility becoming an everyday reality is generally identified as a shock, which incurs "disease" or "growth". This implies that culture shock can be understood both as a negative, illness-like reaction (the disease model) and as a positive opportunity for learning and personal development (the growth model), and that combining both views helps people adapt more effectively across cultures (Dongfeng, 2012). This study provides evidence for "the Growth Model of Culture Shock" instead of "the Disease Model of Culture Shock" which explains the culture change with negative associations (Li, 2012). The assertions of the growth model, which observes shock as an opportunity to learn from challenges, fit better with the findings of this study, since the articles included in this systematic review provide a surplus of evidence supporting that international students value cultural learning during their stay and regard the process as an opportunity to enhance their intercultural competencies.

The study evidenced that although various means like gastronomy, language, music, and sports in the host country are effective in the international students' socialisation process, forming friendship networks with the local students doesn't contribute to this process as much as one might expect. In fact, friendship is a vital component in fulfilling the need for belonging and love, and the international student mobility (ISM) research proves that friendship with the local students contributes significantly to positive outcomes including but not limited to international students' academic success and social integration (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Kim, 2001). Although it's well validated that friendship and connections with the local students have a positive impact on international students' experiences and gains, apart from some research with exceptional results proving that international students to have more friendship networks with the host national (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Kim, 2001), international students prefer to form friendships primarily and dominantly with their co-nationals (Beech, 2017).

As known, international students face many challenges in adjusting to the new national and academic culture, mostly away from their emotional support system. Friendship with the co-nationals might replace the support

system provided by the social spheres back in the home country, thus it helps to alleviate the adjustment stress (Pitts, 2009). Another explanation of having primarily co-national friendship networks might be that international students are seen as a group that will eventually return to their home (Sweeney, 2017), and this might motivate them to invest in friendships with the co-nationals who more likely will be in their future social, academic, or professional spheres than the host nationals. Besides as Kim (2001) argues in her integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation framework, developing friendship networks with the host nationals might be a matter of time. She suggests that as the time passes, the initial co-national friendship networks will leave themselves into ones with more host nationals. International students develop friendships and have deeper connections with the host nationals over time. There is research evidence both supporting (Hernández-Nanclares, 2016) and rejecting (Mittelmeier & Kennedy, 2016) this argument and pointing to different friendship networking patterns between degree seeking and credit seeking mobility students (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015). Thus, the result of this review study should be interpreted carefully, regarding that most of the research included in the sample didn't give details about their current duration of stay.

The reviewed studies show that the factors affecting the social and cultural integration of students during international student mobility can be addressed under the titles of pre-departure factors, individual factors, institutional factors, social and cultural factors. The results of the studies emphasising the importance of social networks in ensuring social integration support the findings of this study (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). However, the findings of the study are in line with the findings of other studies that show formal social integration and informal social integration processes provided by students' social networks are also effective in ensuring social integration during international student mobility (Severiens & Wolff, 2008).

The findings of the study regarding the cultural factors affecting the social and cultural integration process of international students can be evaluated within the scope of "transition theory" (Schlossberg, 1981), which emphasises the importance of coping strategies and support systems developed in new environments. However, the findings also point to cultural competence models that emphasise the development of skills and attitudes that enable individuals to interact effectively in intercultural situations (Cross et al., 1989). The findings can also be supported by Berry's (2005) acculturation model. This model suggests that students who adopt an integration strategy to maintain their cultural identity while interacting with the host culture tend to have more positive experiences.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this systematic review, several key recommendations can be made to enhance the socio-cultural integration of international students. First, as international students tend to build stronger networks with co-nationals and other international students while local contacts remain limited (e.g., Brown, 2009; Wang et al., 2012; Li, 2017), structured interventions are recommended. These may include facilitated intercultural events or mixed-nationality teams (e.g., Pedersen, 2010; Sierra-Huedo et al., 2017) or expanding peer-mentoring programs that connect international and local students (Ragavan, 2014).

Second, evidence shows that pre-departure knowledge, awareness of academic differences, and early exposure to host culture norms significantly reduce stress and help students adapt more smoothly (Adisa et al., 2019; Iorga et al., 2020; Peet et al., 2015; Schartner, 2014). Therefore, institutions must provide pre-departure sessions focusing on academic expectations, local cultural norms and navigating institutional structures in the host university (Dongfeng, 2012; Iorga et al., 2020).

Third, across the reviewed studies, language proficiency emerges as the strongest predictor of both successful socialisation and reduced stress (McGarvey et al., 2021; Peet et al., 2015; Pitt, 2009; Rębisz & Grygiel, 2018). This calls for continuous language tutoring, expanded use of English as a lingua franca in host institutional settings while supporting acquisition of the local language (Noom-ura, 2017; Sobkowiak, 2019).

Additionally, fostering an inclusive campus environment that celebrates cultural diversity will encourage participation in the local community and enrich the student experience. These strategies may involve integrating intercultural pedagogy into the curriculum, training academic and administrative staff in intercultural communication (Li & Pitkänen, 2018) and increasing the visibility and accessibility of international offices, orientation days and culturally diverse student clubs (Yilmaz et al., 2020). This may also ensure that intercultural learning outcomes are developed to a greater extent during the study abroad program (Gondra & Czerwionka, 2018). Finally, institutions should offer tailored psychosocial and academic support to mitigate barriers such as stress, homesickness, and discrimination (Aladegbaiye et al., 2022; Brown, 2009).

7. Conclusion

This systematic review delves into the effects of international student mobility (ISM) on student socialisation, the primary factors influencing their

socio-cultural integration, and the obstacles they confront. From this analysis, several significant conclusions have emerged. First, the findings reveal that international student mobility enhances students' cultural awareness and socialisation by exposing them to the host country's social and cultural environment. Students engage in daily activities such as gastronomy, language, music, and sports, which facilitate their integration and interaction with different cultures. While social relationships with local students help improve their language skills and social adaptation, many international students tend to socialise more with fellow international students than with local peers. This limited interaction with local students may constrain their cultural and social integration in the host country.

Second, the study identifies several factors influencing the socio-cultural integration of international students during their academic stay. These factors include individual characteristics like language proficiency, personal motivation, and previous abroad experiences. Institutional factors such as program structure, availability of scholarships, and support services from universities (like orientation programs and international offices) play a significant role. Social connections with local communities, participation in cultural activities, and interactions with locals further enhance integration. Moreover, exposure to the host country's cultural and linguistic diversity, the ability to practice religious beliefs, and participation in organized events contribute positively to students' cultural immersion and socio-cultural adaptation.

Third, the study highlights the barriers and limitations faced by international students in their integration efforts. Language barriers are the most significant challenge, as insufficient proficiency in the local language can lead to social isolation and stress. Cultural differences and the process of adapting to the host country's social norms can also be challenging, causing students to feel excluded or isolated. Social isolation is further compounded when international students primarily form groups with peers from their own country, limiting interaction with local students. Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient support from universities hinder the integration process. Effective support systems and integration programs are essential to overcoming these barriers and fostering better socio-cultural integration for international students.

8. Limitations of the study

While this systematic review provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the socio-cultural integration of international students, it is not without its limitations. First, the scope of the review is limited to studies

published in English, potentially excluding valuable insights from research conducted in other languages. Second, the study primarily relies on secondary data, which may not fully capture nuanced or localized experiences of international students. Third, due to the inherent nature of systematic reviews, this study does not offer direct empirical data or field-based findings. Lastly, differences in institutional and cultural contexts across the studies reviewed may limit the generalizability of the findings, as they are drawn from diverse higher education systems.

9. Future research avenues

Future research should address these limitations by conducting longitudinal studies that capture the dynamic and evolving nature of international students' integration experiences. In particular, there is a need for research that incorporates non-English academic sources to provide a more global perspective. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural and institutional settings could provide deeper insights into the contextual factors influencing integration. Researchers should also consider mixed method approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data to explore both the structural and individual dimensions of integration. Finally, further studies focusing on the experiences of underrepresented groups among international students, such as those from developing countries or marginalized backgrounds, could significantly contribute to a more inclusive understanding of the topic.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors report no competing interest in connection with this publication.

Data availability statement

Data is available upon request from the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by ENIS cost action [grant number CA20115].

Use of AI

The authors report no usage of AI during the compilation of this manuscript.

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