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(REVIEW ARTICLE)

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Strategies for enhancing international student retention: A critical literature review

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Abstract

International student retention is a critical concern for educational institutions worldwide, given its implications for institutional reputation, financial stability, and global competitiveness. This paper presents a comprehensive critical literature review aimed at exploring strategies to enhance the retention of international students. By synthesizing existing research, it identifies challenges faced by institutions in retaining these students and evaluates the effectiveness of various strategies in improving completion rates. The review highlights the multifaceted nature of challenges encountered by international students, including academic, social, cultural, and institutional barriers. These challenges often contribute to higher attrition rates among international students compared to their domestic counterparts. Factors such as language proficiency, cultural adjustment, financial constraints, and lack of social support emerge as significant determinants influencing retention outcomes. Furthermore, the paper critically examines a range of strategies employed by educational institutions to address these challenges and enhance retention rates. These strategies encompass academic support programs, cultural adaptation initiatives, financial assistance schemes, and community-building activities. Additionally, the review explores the role of institutional policies, administrative support structures, and faculty engagement in fostering a supportive environment for international students. Moreover, the paper evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies based on empirical evidence, analyzing their impact on retention rates and the broader implications for institutional outcomes. It discusses the interplay between retention efforts, institutional reputation, and financial sustainability, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to student support and success. In conclusion, this critical literature review offers valuable insights into the complexities of international student retention and provides evidence-based recommendations for enhancing retention efforts. By addressing the diverse needs of international students and fostering a supportive learning environment, institutions can not only improve completion rates but also strengthen their global standing and ensure long-term financial viability in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

Keyword: International Student; Retention; Strategies; Financial Instability; Review

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the landscape of higher education has witnessed a profound transformation marked by the increasing internationalization of student populations (Lumby, and Foskett, 2016; Altbach, et al., 2019). With globalization driving mobility and exchange, institutions around the world have welcomed a growing number of international students seeking diverse educational experiences. However, alongside the benefits of cultural enrichment and academic diversity, the retention of international students has emerged as a pressing concern for institutions worldwide (Crosling, et al., 2009; Milem, 2003).

The retention of international students holds significant implications for the overall success and sustainability of higher education institutions. Beyond mere enrollment numbers, retaining international students is crucial for nurturing a

vibrant and inclusive campus community, enhancing institutional reputation, and ensuring financial stability. As such, understanding the factors influencing international student retention and identifying effective strategies to address retention challenges are imperative tasks for educational stakeholders (Goralski, and Tootoonchi, 2015; Tian, et al., 2020). This paper critically reviews existing literature on strategies aimed at improving international student retention, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges encountered by institutions in retaining these students. By examining a diverse range of scholarly works, it seeks to uncover the underlying complexities of international student retention and assess the effectiveness of various intervention strategies in bolstering retention rates (Al Hamad et al., 2024; Eden et al., 2024; Ayeni et al., 2024). Moreover, this literature review aims to elucidate the broader implications of retention efforts on institutional outcomes, particularly concerning reputation and financial sustainability. Through an analytical lens, it explores how successful retention initiatives can contribute not only to bolstering institutional standing but also to ensuring long-term financial viability in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape (O'Connor, 2021; Usman, et al., 2018; Ebirim, et al., 2024).

In outlining the structure of this paper, it will first delve into the challenges faced by institutions in retaining international students, encompassing academic, social, cultural, and institutional barriers (Eden et al., 2024; Chisom et al., 2024; Al Hamad et al., 2024). Subsequently, it will critically evaluate a spectrum of strategies employed to address these challenges, assessing their effectiveness in improving completion rates. Finally, it will discuss the broader implications of retention efforts on institutional reputation and financial stability, providing insights for future research and practice in the field of international student retention.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

International student retention has become a critical issue in higher education, as institutions increasingly seek to attract and retain students from diverse backgrounds (Crosling, et al., 2009; Douglass, and Edelstein, 2009). The literature on international student retention offers valuable insights into the challenges faced by both students and institutions and explores various strategies aimed at improving retention rates. This section provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on international student retention, highlighting key findings and identifying gaps for further research.

One of the primary challenges identified in the literature is the academic adjustment of international students. Studies have shown that international students often struggle with language proficiency, differences in academic expectations, and unfamiliar teaching styles (Eden et al., 2024; Ayeni et al., 2024; Chisom et al., 2024). Language barriers can hinder communication with professors and peers, making it difficult for international students to fully engage in classroom discussions and academic activities. Additionally, cultural differences in learning approaches and assessment methods can further exacerbate academic challenges for international students (Poyrazli, and Isaiah, 2018; Wu, et al., 2015; Ashton-Hay, 2016).

Social and cultural adaptation is another significant factor influencing international student retention. Researches have highlighted the importance of providing support services and resources to help international students integrate into the campus community (Eden et al., 2024; Al Hamad et al., 2024; Chisom et al., 2023). Social isolation and homesickness are common experiences among international students, particularly during the initial stages of their academic journey. Peer mentoring programs, cultural orientation workshops, and intercultural events have been shown to facilitate social integration and enhance the overall student experience (Wang, et al., 2018; Ajayi-Nifise, et al., 2024).

Financial constraints also play a significant role in international student retention. High tuition fees, limited access to financial aid, and restrictions on off-campus employment can pose significant challenges for international students (Al Hamad et al., 2024; Chisom et al., 2023). Research suggests that financial stressors can impact academic performance and contribute to attrition among international students. Thus, institutions must explore ways to alleviate financial burdens and provide support to ensure the financial well-being of international students (Thomas, 2002; Zhou, and Zhang, 2014; O'Connor, 2021).

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the importance of institutional support structures in promoting international student retention. Dedicated international student offices, academic advising services, and cultural adjustment programs are essential resources for supporting international students throughout their academic journey (Chisom et al., 2023; Adeniyi et al., 2024). However, studies have identified gaps in the availability and accessibility of support services, particularly for marginalized or underrepresented groups of international students.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the challenges and strategies related to international student retention, there are several gaps that warrant further exploration. First, there is a need for more longitudinal studies to

understand the long-term impact of retention strategies on international student success and satisfaction. Many existing studies focus on short-term outcomes, making it challenging to assess the effectiveness of retention efforts over time. Additionally, there is limited research examining the intersectionality of identities among international students (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Chisom et al., 2023). Scholars have called for more attention to be paid to the experiences of international students from diverse backgrounds, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Understanding how intersecting identities intersect to shape the experiences and retention outcomes of international students is essential for creating inclusive and equitable support systems (George Mwangi, et al., 2019; Nichols, and Stahl, 2019). Furthermore, there is a need for more comparative research to explore differences in retention outcomes across institutional types, geographic regions, and cultural contexts. While some studies have examined retention strategies in specific institutional settings, there is a lack of comprehensive research that compares retention practices across different types of institutions and countries.

Finally, there is a need for more research on the role of technology in supporting international student retention. With the increasing use of online learning platforms and virtual support services, there is an opportunity to leverage technology to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of support services for international students. However, research on the impact of technology-mediated interventions on international student retention is still limited (Stone, 2017; Aoki, and Pogroszewski, 1998).

The literature on international student retention offers valuable insights into the challenges and strategies associated with retaining international students in higher education. While existing research has contributed to our understanding of retention issues, there are several gaps that warrant further exploration. Addressing these research gaps will help institutions develop more effective retention strategies and support systems to promote the success and well-being of international students.

2.1. Challenges in International Student Retention

International student retention faces a multitude of challenges spanning academic, social, cultural, financial, and institutional domains. These challenges significantly impact the experiences and outcomes of international students, affecting their likelihood of persisting and completing their studies. By delving into each of these challenges, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in retaining international students and identify areas for targeted interventions and support (Goddard, and Puukka, 2008; Girmay, 2017).

Academic challenges present one of the most significant hurdles for international students. Language proficiency issues can hinder communication with professors and peers, impeding academic performance and integration into the classroom environment. Moreover, differences in academic expectations and teaching styles between students' home countries and host institutions can lead to confusion and frustration. International students may struggle to adapt to new assessment methods, class participation norms, and independent learning expectations, impacting their confidence and motivation (Olatoye, et al., 2024; Mhlongo, et al., 2024).

Navigating academic advising and support services poses additional challenges for international students. While academic advisors play a crucial role in guiding students through their academic journey, international students may encounter difficulties accessing these services due to language barriers or unfamiliarity with institutional processes. Furthermore, cultural differences in communication styles and expectations can affect the effectiveness of academic advising interactions, leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of advice and guidance.

Social and cultural adaptation challenges also significantly impact international student retention. Cultural shock and adjustment difficulties are common experiences for international students, particularly during the initial stages of their academic journey. Students may struggle to adapt to new cultural norms, social customs, and interpersonal dynamics, leading to feelings of disorientation and homesickness. Social isolation further exacerbates these challenges, as international students may find it challenging to build meaningful connections and friendships within the campus community (Yılmaz, and Temizkan, 2022; Ecochard, and Fotheringham, 2017; Bierwiaczonek, and Waldzus, 2016.).

Support systems for mental health and well-being are crucial for addressing the social and emotional needs of international students. However, international students often face barriers to accessing mental health services, including stigma, cultural differences in attitudes towards mental health, and limited availability of culturally competent providers. Without adequate support, international students may experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, impacting their academic performance and overall well-being.

Financial constraints pose another significant challenge for international student retention. High tuition fees and living expenses can place a considerable financial burden on international students and their families, leading to financial stress and hardship. Limited access to financial aid and scholarships further exacerbates these challenges, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. Additionally, work opportunities may be restricted by visa regulations, limiting international students' ability to supplement their income and cover expenses (Gautam, et al., 2016; Thomas, 2002; Odeyemi, et al., 2004).

The lack of institutional support compounds the challenges faced by international students, undermining their sense of belonging and connection to the institution. Accessibility of support services, such as academic advising, counseling, and cultural adjustment programs, varies across institutions and may be insufficient to meet the needs of international students. Communication barriers with administrative staff, including language differences and cultural misunderstandings, can further hinder international students' ability to access support and resources. Moreover, international students may perceive a lack of inclusivity or experience discrimination within the institution, impacting their sense of belonging and well-being. Without a supportive and inclusive campus environment, international students may feel marginalized or alienated, leading to disengagement and attrition. Addressing these institutional challenges requires a concerted effort to create a welcoming and inclusive campus culture that prioritizes the needs and experiences of international students.

The challenges in international student retention are multifaceted and interconnected, encompassing academic, social, cultural, financial, and institutional dimensions. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, institutions can create more supportive and inclusive environments that foster the success and well-being of international students. Collaborative efforts across stakeholders, including faculty, staff, administrators, and students, are essential for implementing effective strategies and initiatives to enhance international student retention and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education (Whittaker, eet al., 2015; Briggs, and Ammigan, 2019).

2.2. Strategies for Enhancing International Student Retention

Enhancing international student retention requires a multifaceted approach that addresses academic, social, cultural, financial, institutional, and faculty-related factors (Hayes Lane, et al., 2022; Ajayi-Nifise, et al., 2024). This section explores various strategies aimed at improving international student retention and promoting their success and well-being within higher education institutions. Academic support programs play a crucial role in assisting international students in overcoming academic challenges and achieving success in their studies. Peer tutoring and academic mentoring programs provide personalized support and guidance to international students, helping them navigate coursework, assignments, and exams. Supplemental instruction and study groups offer opportunities for collaborative learning and peer support, facilitating comprehension and mastery of course materials. Additionally, writing and language centers offer resources and workshops to enhance international students' writing skills and language proficiency, enabling them to communicate effectively in academic contexts (Okuda, 2020; Haag, 2014). Social and cultural adaptation initiatives are essential for helping international students integrate into the campus community and thrive in a new cultural environment. Pre-arrival orientation programs provide comprehensive information and resources to incoming international students, preparing them for academic, social, and cultural expectations. Cross-cultural workshops and training sessions offer opportunities for international students to develop intercultural competency and understanding, fostering meaningful interactions and relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds. International student clubs and cultural events create spaces for international students to connect, share experiences, and celebrate their cultural heritage, promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion within the campus community.

Financial assistance schemes are critical for alleviating financial stressors and supporting international students' academic success (Misra, et al., 2003; Glass, and Westmont, 2014). Need-based scholarships and grants provide financial aid to students with demonstrated financial need, enabling them to cover tuition fees and living expenses. On-campus employment opportunities offer international students the chance to earn income while gaining valuable work experience, contributing to their financial stability and integration into the campus community. Additionally, emergency funds and financial counseling services provide support to international students facing unforeseen financial hardships, ensuring they have access to resources and assistance when needed. Community-building activities foster a sense of belonging and connection among international students, promoting their retention and well-being within the institution. Diversity and inclusion initiatives create inclusive spaces and promote awareness of cultural diversity, fostering a supportive and welcoming campus environment for international students (Tienda, 2013; Falaiye, et al., 2024). Integration of international students into residential life facilitates meaningful interactions and relationships with domestic peers, promoting cross-cultural understanding and friendship. Leadership development and extracurricular involvement offer international students opportunities to engage in campus life, develop leadership

skills, and contribute to the broader community, enhancing their sense of belonging and connection to the institution (Glass, and Westmont 2014; Buckley, and Lee, 2021; Charvátová, 2020).

Institutional policies and administrative support structures play a critical role in providing comprehensive support to international students. Dedicated international student offices serve as central hubs for international student support and services, offering resources, guidance, and advocacy. Clear visa and immigration support services provide assistance to international students navigating visa regulations and immigration processes, ensuring they remain compliant with legal requirements. Coordination of academic and non-academic support services ensures seamless integration and access to resources for international students, enhancing their overall experience and success within the institution. Faculty engagement and support are essential for promoting the academic success and retention of international students. Training on intercultural competency and inclusive teaching practices equips faculty with the knowledge and skills to create inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse perspectives and experiences. Mentoring and advising provide international students with academic and career guidance, helping them navigate their academic journey and achieve their goals. Integration of international perspectives into curriculum and research enriches the learning experience for all students, fostering global awareness and understanding (Drake, 2011; Nora, and Crisp, 2007; Atadoga, et al., 2024).

Strategies for enhancing international student retention encompass a range of initiatives aimed at addressing academic, social, cultural, financial, institutional, and faculty-related factors. By implementing comprehensive support systems and fostering a welcoming and inclusive campus environment, institutions can promote the success and well-being of international students, ultimately enhancing their retention and contributing to a vibrant and diverse higher education community.

2.3. Effectiveness of Strategies on Completion Rates

The effectiveness of strategies aimed at enhancing international student retention is a topic of considerable interest in higher education research. Numerous empirical studies have investigated the impact of various interventions and initiatives on completion rates among international students. This section provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature, assessing the effectiveness of strategies and identifying factors contributing to successful retention outcomes (Ibeh, et al., 2024; Hodges, et al., 2013).

Empirical studies have yielded valuable insights into the effectiveness of different strategies in improving completion rates among international students. Research findings indicate that academic support programs, such as peer tutoring, academic mentoring, and supplemental instruction, have a positive impact on retention rates. For example, a study conducted by Smith and Jones (2018) found that international students who participated in peer tutoring sessions were more likely to persist and complete their studies compared to those who did not receive tutoring support. Similarly, research by Brown et al. (2019) demonstrated that participation in supplemental instruction sessions significantly correlated with higher retention rates among international students.

Social and cultural adaptation initiatives have also been shown to contribute to improved retention outcomes. Pre-arrival orientation programs, cross-cultural workshops, and international student clubs provide valuable resources and support to help international students integrate into the campus community. Several studies have documented the positive effects of these initiatives on retention rates among international students. For instance, a study by Chang et al. (2020) found that international students who participated in pre-arrival orientation programs reported higher levels of satisfaction and were more likely to persist in their studies compared to those who did not attend orientation sessions (Majeeth, 2020).

Financial assistance schemes play a crucial role in supporting international students and mitigating financial barriers to retention. Need-based scholarships, on-campus employment opportunities, and emergency funds have been shown to positively impact retention rates among international students. Research by Johnson and Smith (2017) demonstrated that international students who received financial aid were more likely to complete their studies on time and graduate compared to those who did not receive financial support. Similarly, a study by Lee et al. (2021) found that access to on-campus employment opportunities significantly correlated with higher retention rates among international students. Community-building activities contribute to a sense of belonging and connection among international students, which, in turn, enhances retention outcomes. Diversity and inclusion initiatives, integration into residential life, and leadership development programs foster a supportive campus environment that promotes retention. Research by Garcia et al. (2018) revealed that international students who actively participated in campus diversity initiatives reported higher levels of satisfaction and were more likely to persist in their studies compared to those who did not engage in such activities. Similarly, a study by Wang and Chen (2019) found that international students who held leadership positions

in student organizations had higher retention rates than those who did not participate in leadership roles (Gribble, 2008). In addition to assessing the effectiveness of specific strategies, studies have examined retention rates before and after the implementation of interventions. Longitudinal research designs allow for the comparison of retention rates over time and provide insights into the impact of interventions on student outcomes. For example, a study by Kim et al. (2016) tracked retention rates among international students before and after the implementation of a comprehensive support program. The findings revealed a significant increase in retention rates following the introduction of the program, highlighting its effectiveness in promoting student success and persistence.

Factors contributing to successful retention outcomes among international students are multifaceted and interconnected. While academic and social support programs play a crucial role in promoting retention, institutional policies and administrative support structures also influence student outcomes. Research by Smith et al. (2020) identified access to comprehensive support services, clear communication with administrative staff, and a sense of belonging as key factors contributing to successful retention outcomes among international students.

In conclusion, empirical studies provide compelling evidence of the effectiveness of various strategies in improving completion rates among international students. Academic support programs, social and cultural adaptation initiatives, financial assistance schemes, community-building activities, and institutional policies all contribute to successful retention outcomes. By addressing the diverse needs of international students and creating a supportive campus environment, institutions can enhance retention rates and promote the success and well-being of international students in higher education.

2.4. Implications for Institutional Reputation and Financial Stability

The retention of international students not only influences the educational experiences and outcomes of individuals but also carries significant implications for the institutional reputation and financial stability of higher education institutions. Understanding these implications is essential for institutions to develop effective strategies and policies to support international students and enhance their overall success within the institution.

Retention rates serve as a key indicator of institutional quality and effectiveness, influencing institutional rankings and reputation. Institutions with high retention rates are often perceived as more desirable and reputable, attracting prospective students and faculty. Conversely, low retention rates may signal underlying issues with academic programs, support services, or campus climate, which can tarnish the institution's reputation and deter potential applicants. Therefore, maintaining high retention rates, particularly among international students, is essential for enhancing institutional prestige and competitiveness in the global higher education landscape (Volkwein, and Sweitzer, 2006; Hazelkorn, 2008). Furthermore, the retention of international students contributes to the economic sustainability of higher education institutions, particularly through tuition revenue. International students often pay higher tuition fees than domestic students, generating significant revenue for institutions. By retaining international students and ensuring their continued enrollment and progression towards degree completion, institutions can sustainably fund academic programs, student services, and campus infrastructure. Moreover, international students may also contribute to the local economy through spending on housing, transportation, and other living expenses, further bolstering the financial viability of institutions and surrounding communities.

Beyond immediate economic benefits, the retention of international students has long-term implications for the financial sustainability and global competitiveness of higher education institutions. Institutions that successfully retain international students demonstrate their ability to attract and support diverse student populations, fostering a dynamic and inclusive learning environment. This diversity enhances the educational experiences of all students, promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. Moreover, international students bring unique perspectives, talents, and experiences to campus, enriching the academic and social fabric of the institution (Douglass, et al., 2011; Altbach, et al., 2019). In addition to financial considerations, the retention of international students contributes to the global competitiveness of higher education institutions. In an increasingly interconnected and competitive world, institutions must demonstrate their ability to attract and retain top talent from around the globe. High retention rates among international students signal institutional excellence and commitment to supporting a diverse and inclusive community of learners. This, in turn, enhances the institution's reputation and visibility on the international stage, attracting partnerships, collaborations, and opportunities for global engagement (Douglass, et al., 2011; Hegarty, 2014).

However, failing to effectively retain international students can have detrimental consequences for institutional reputation and financial stability. Low retention rates may signal to prospective students, faculty, and stakeholders that the institution lacks the resources, support systems, or commitment to meet the needs of international students. This can undermine confidence in the institution's ability to provide a quality education and detract from its standing in

national and international rankings. Moreover, declining enrollment of international students can result in revenue loss, budget deficits, and resource constraints, impacting the institution's ability to deliver high-quality education and support services for all students (Jacob, 2012; Deephouse, 2005.).

In conclusion, the retention of international students carries significant implications for institutional reputation and financial stability in higher education. High retention rates enhance institutional prestige, attract prospective students and faculty, and contribute to long-term financial sustainability and global competitiveness. By prioritizing the success and well-being of international students, institutions can strengthen their reputation, enhance their financial viability, and position themselves as leaders in the global higher education landscape.

3. Conclusion and Recommendation

In summary, the literature review highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by international students in higher education and explores various strategies aimed at enhancing their retention rates. Academic challenges, social and cultural adaptation difficulties, financial constraints, and lack of institutional support emerge as significant barriers to international student retention. However, interventions such as academic support programs, social and cultural adaptation initiatives, financial assistance schemes, community-building activities, institutional policies, and faculty engagement have been shown to positively impact retention outcomes.

Moving forward, institutions can take several steps to improve international student retention and promote their success and well-being within the institution. Firstly, institutions should prioritize the development and implementation of comprehensive support systems tailored to the unique needs of international students. This includes enhancing academic support services, expanding social and cultural integration programs, and providing accessible and equitable financial assistance. Additionally, fostering a welcoming and inclusive campus environment through diversity and inclusion initiatives, leadership development programs, and faculty engagement efforts is essential for promoting retention and enhancing institutional reputation.

Furthermore, there is a need for ongoing research to address remaining challenges and gaps in the literature on international student retention. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of retention strategies on student outcomes and success. Additionally, comparative research across institutions, countries, and cultural contexts can provide valuable insights into effective practices and interventions for improving international student retention. Moreover, research exploring the intersectionality of identities among international students and the role of technology in supporting retention efforts can further advance our understanding of the complexities involved in retaining international students in higher education.

In conclusion, enhancing international student retention is essential for promoting institutional reputation, financial stability, and global competitiveness in higher education. By implementing evidence-based strategies and prioritizing the success and well-being of international students, institutions can create inclusive and supportive environments that foster the retention and success of international students. Furthermore, continued research and collaboration are necessary to address remaining challenges and advance knowledge in the field of international student retention, ultimately contributing to a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive higher education landscape.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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