South–South Student Mobility Research: Mapping Trends, Thematic Directions, and Emerging Gaps

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

South–South student mobility has emerged as a significant yet underexplored phenomenon within international education. This study examines the development of South–South mobility research by analysing publication trends, thematic emphases, and research gaps. Drawing on a Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR) approach, a systematic mapping of 81 empirical studies was conducted, combining descriptive analysis, bibliometric visualization, and thematic clustering techniques. The findings reveal that research remains geographically concentrated on Africa–Asia and Asia–Asia flows, with China, Malaysia, and South Africa serving as dominant destinations. However, newer host countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam are gradually entering the landscape, suggesting emerging shifts in mobility patterns. Thematically, existing scholarship is heavily oriented toward structural factors such as affordability and institutional reputation, while more recent studies begin to explore students' digital journeys and experiences of transnational belonging. Methodologically, qualitative approaches dominate, although there is a growing need for longitudinal and mixed methods designs to capture the dynamic trajectories of student mobility over time. Significant silences persist, including the underrepresentation of intra-Latin American mobility and limited attention to digital environments shaping students' experiences. The study argues for future research that expands regional coverage, embraces more diverse methodologies, and moves beyond Global North-centric frameworks. By doing so, South–South mobility scholarship can better reflect the complexity and evolving realities of student movements within and across Global South contexts.

INTRODUCTION

While the well-documented flows of international students toward established academic centers in the Global North have long dominated the landscape of higher education research, a less visible yet increasingly important trend is reshaping educational dynamics across the Global South: South–South student mobility. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on movements to traditional powerhouses such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, often overshadowing alternative patterns (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Mbous et al., 2024). However, the rising scale and significance of South–South mobility, student movements between countries within the Global South, can no longer be regarded as marginal. Instead, it represents a dynamic and evolving dimension of global higher education that warrants closer scholarly attention (Leal et al., 2022; Prazeres, 2017).

Recent developments show that South–South mobility is not merely incidental but reflects deliberate strategies undertaken by students, governments, and higher education institutions. These actors are actively forging new educational linkages, fostering regional cooperation, and broadening opportunities beyond traditional Global North-centric models (Bauschke-Urban &

Dedgjoni, 2025; França & Padilla, 2022). Students are increasingly drawn to South–South pathways for various reasons, including more affordable tuition fees, geographic proximity, shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and the emergence of new hubs of academic (Gbollie & Gong, 2020b; Kazemi et al., 2018; Muslim et al., 2025). Despite its growing relevance, the scholarship in this area remains somewhat fragmented, often based on isolated case studies and lacking the comprehensive syntheses and reflections needed to advance theoretical and methodological debates (França & Padilla, 2022; Leal et al., 2024).

Although scholarship on South–South student mobility has expanded in recent years, it remains somewhat fragmented and lacks cohesion. Research has often been highly localized, focusing on national or regional contexts without sufficient comparative analysis. While these studies provide valuable insights, they rarely build toward a broader theoretical understanding of how South–South mobility differs from traditional South–North patterns. Furthermore, the field shows limited methodological innovation, relying heavily on qualitative case studies with relatively few mixed-methods or longitudinal investigations. As a result, patterns, variations, and underlying structures within South–South mobility remains underexplored, highlighting the need for more integrative and systematic research efforts.

Recognizing these gaps and the growing importance of South–South student mobility, this study aims to explore the evolution of research in this field. The main research question guiding this study is: How has South–South student mobility scholarship evolved regarding research trends, thematic focuses, and identified gaps, and what directions should future research take?

To address this overarching inquiry, the study explores the following sub-questions:
RQ1: What are the key publication trends and patterns characterize South–South student mobility research?
RQ2: What thematic areas have received the most scholarly attention, and conversely, what significant gaps or silences are evident within the existing literature?
RQ3: What future research directions can be proposed to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon of South–South mobility?

This study adopts a dual methodological approach to answer these questions. First, a bibliometric analysis maps the structural dimensions of the field, identifying publication trends, influential authors, leading journals, and collaboration networks. Second, a systematic literature review provides a qualitative synthesis of the major conceptual developments, theoretical approaches, and underexplored areas identified in the existing research. Combining these two methods offers a robust and nuanced foundation for examining the intellectual landscape of South–South mobility scholarship.

Through this analysis, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to broaden and deepen international education research. It seeks to foreground perspectives from the Global South, diversify epistemological approaches, and challenge the enduring dominance of Global North-centric narratives in studying academic mobility.

METHODS

This study adopted a Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR) approach (Marzi et al., 2025) integrating co-occurrence-based bibliometric analysis with a thematic synthesis of qualitative findings to examine the intellectual structure and thematic development of South–South student mobility scholarship. The B-SLR method enables both a structural mapping of knowledge domains via keyword networks and cluster detection and a deep interpretive review that identifies research gaps, emerging trends, and opportunities for theoretical advancement (Donthu et al., 2021; Marzi et al., 2025).

Data Collection and Selection

The data collection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). Records were retrieved from two major academic databases, Scopus and Web of Science, selected for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed international publications. Data

retrieval was conducted in January 2025 to capture publications up to the end of 2024. The search strategy combined four conceptual clusters: international students, South–South or Global South contexts, mobility or migration, and higher education settings. Table 1 presents the detailed search terms used. Searches were limited to English-language articles and conference proceedings published between 1973 and 2024.

Table 1. Search Strategy for Database Retrieval

Conceptual Focus	Search Terms
International Students	"international student*" OR "foreign student*" OR "overseas student*" OR "cross-border student*"
South-South/Global South Context	"South-South" OR "Global South" OR "developing country*" OR "Asia*" OR "Africa*" OR "Latin America*" OR "ASEAN" OR "Global South cooperation"
Mobility and Migration	"mobility" OR "migration" OR "exchange" OR "flow*" OR "circulation"
Higher Education Context	"higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "university*" OR "college*"

All retrieved records (n = 704) from Web of Science (n = 382) and Scopus (n = 322) were imported into Covidence, a web-based platform designed to streamline systematic review management. Duplicate entries were automatically detected and removed by Covidence (n = 208), with one additional duplicate identified manually, resulting in the exclusion of 209 records. The remaining 495 unique records underwent title and abstract screening by two independent reviewers, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion to reach consensus.

Following the initial screening, 152 articles were selected for full-text retrieval. Of these, 10 articles could not be retrieved due to access issues or unavailability. The remaining 142 full-text articles were then assessed against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they (1) explicitly focused on international student mobility between countries of the Global South, (2) were situated within higher or tertiary education contexts, (3) were published in English, and (4) were empirical in nature (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods). Exclusion criteria included: (1) focus solely on South–North or domestic mobility, (2) topics unrelated to student mobility (e.g., general migration, refugee studies), (3) non-English language publications, (4) non-empirical works such as commentaries or conceptual papers, and (5) inaccessible full texts. In cases where a study involved both South–South and South–North mobility, it was included if the dominant focus was on South–South student mobility. Based on this assessment, 61 studies were excluded, resulting in 81 studies included in the final review. The full screening and selection process is summarized in Figure 1 in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

For all included studies, key information was extracted systematically to support further analysis. The extracted data included: (1) the Country of Mobility Origin, identifying the home country or region of the international students; (2) the Country of Mobility Destination, where the students pursued higher education; (3) a binary classification of South–South Focus, indicating whether the study clearly addressed mobility between Global South countries; (4) the Type of South–South Region, such as Africa–Africa, Asia–Africa, or Latin America–Asia; and (5) the Research Method used, categorized as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. These variables allowed for deeper synthesis and categorization of mobility patterns, regional dynamics, and methodological trends in the literature. When necessary, country details and methodological classifications were verified through the methods or participant sections of each full-text article.
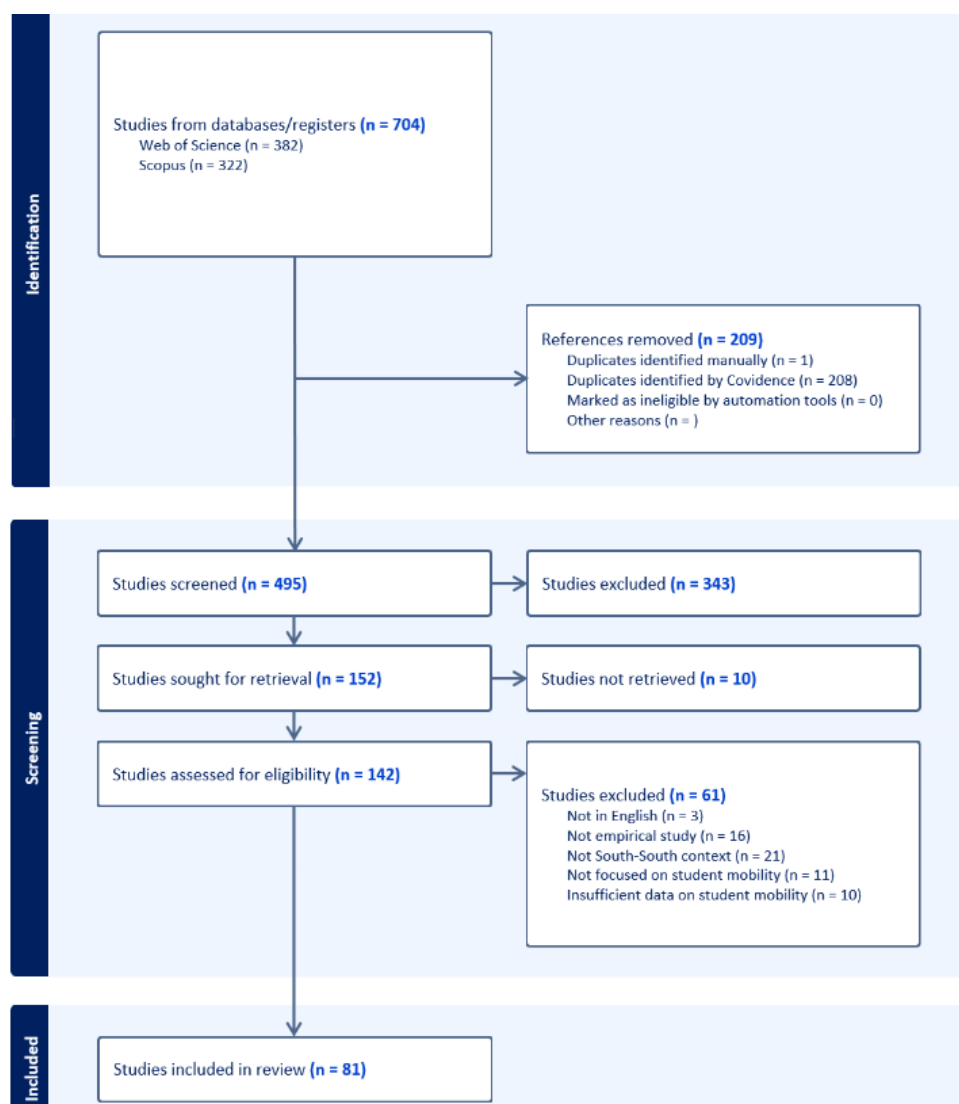
Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart

Quality Assessment

Quality assessment of the included studies was conducted using a revised Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist tailored for student mobility research. The adapted CASP tool consisted of 11 items covering aspects such as clarity of research aims, appropriateness of methodology, recruitment strategies, data collection rigor, ethical considerations, data analysis quality, and the significance of findings (Long et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024). Each study was independently assessed by two reviewers, with any disagreements resolved through discussion. Studies were not excluded based on quality scores, but the assessments informed the interpretation of results, highlighting variations in methodological robustness across the body of research.

Bibliometrics Analysis

To complement the qualitative synthesis, a bibliometric analysis was conducted on the 81 included studies with accessible metadata. This analysis aimed to identify key thematic structures and research trends within South–South student mobility literature. Bibliographic data, including titles, abstracts, and keywords, were exported in CSV format and analysed using VOSviewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010, 2020). The analysis focused on keyword co-occurrence to map conceptual linkages and thematic concentrations. Before the analysis, a thesaurus file was developed to standardize terms, merging singular and plural forms, harmonizing spelling variants (e.g., "behavior" vs "behaviour"), and consolidating synonymous expressions such as "student mobility,"

"international students," and "cross-border education". This step ensured greater consistency and reduced fragmentation in the co-occurrence network. VOSviewer's co-occurrence mapping technique identified keyword clusters that frequently appeared together, highlighting prominent themes in the field. While the interpretation of thematic clusters and trend shifts is presented in the Results section, this methodological step provided an empirical basis for visualizing the evolution of research priorities across regions and periods. This bibliometric approach added a quantitative layer to the systematic review, enhancing the depth and rigor of the overall analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

To illustrate the growing academic interest in South–South student mobility, the publication trend from the 81 included studies was analyzed. As shown in Appendix 1, the number of publications remained relatively low until 2018 but rose significantly thereafter, peaking in 2024. This upward trend reflects a shifting scholarly focus toward emerging mobility patterns beyond traditional Global North destinations.

Bibliometric Analysis Results

To complement the qualitative synthesis, a bibliometric analysis was conducted to explore conceptual structures and thematic trends within the literature on South–South student mobility. Using VOSviewer, co-occurrence analysis was performed on author-assigned and indexed keywords from the 81 included studies. The resulting network visualization enabled the identification of dominant clusters, frequently co-occurring terms, and conceptual linkages across the field. The output of this analysis is presented in Figure 2.
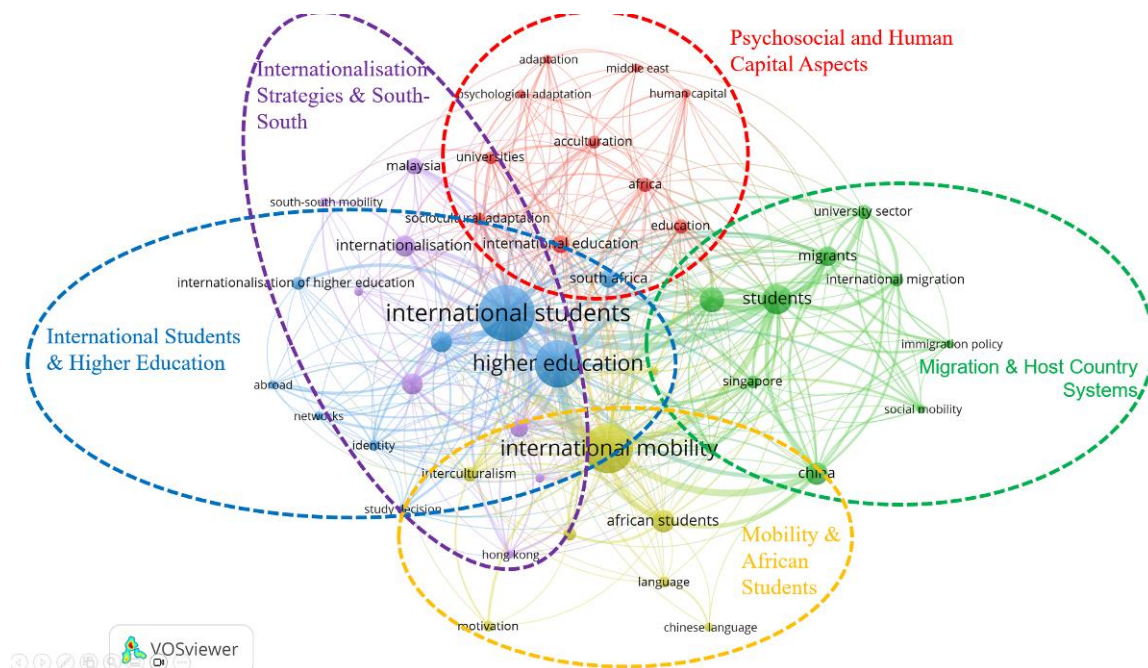

Figure 2. Cluster visualisation

The co-occurrence analysis revealed five major thematic areas that structure the literature on South–South student mobility. At the center of the network lies a dominant discourse around *international students*, *higher education*, and *international mobility*, reflecting the field's core focus. Surrounding this are discussions of institutional and regional strategies for *internationalisation*, with emphasis on intra-South collaboration, particularly in countries like

Malaysia and South Africa. These are captured within the purple cluster, which reflects institutional responses and regional integration efforts.

The red cluster focuses on psychosocial and human capital dimensions of mobility. Keywords such as *adaptation*, *acculturation*, *psychological adaptation*, and *human capital* indicate a research strand concerned with how students adjust, grow, and acquire skills in host countries. These studies frequently examine context-specific adaptation challenges, especially among students from Africa and the Middle East. The green cluster reflects mobility through a migration and policy lens. Keywords such as *migrants*, *immigration policy*, and *university sector* highlight the interplay between international education and national migration frameworks. China and Singapore are often featured as policy-driven host contexts.

Meanwhile, the yellow cluster emphasizes the experiences of African students, particularly the role of *language*, *motivation*, and regional aspirations in shaping educational mobility. Terms such as *Chinese language* and *Hong Kong* suggest East Asian destinations are a key focus in this group. Together, these clusters, illustrated in Figure 2, underscore the multifaceted and regionally grounded nature of South–South student mobility research.

Temporal Trends in South–South Student Mobility Research
To further explore the temporal dynamics of South–South student mobility research, an overlay visualization was generated using VOSviewer. This visualization assigns colours to keywords based on the average year of publication in which they appeared, allowing for the identification of emerging topics and shifts in thematic emphasis over time. Figure 3 presents the overlay map based on the co-occurrence of keywords from the 81 included studies, with the colour gradient ranging from dark blue (older terms, around 2019) to yellow (more recent terms, closer to 2023).
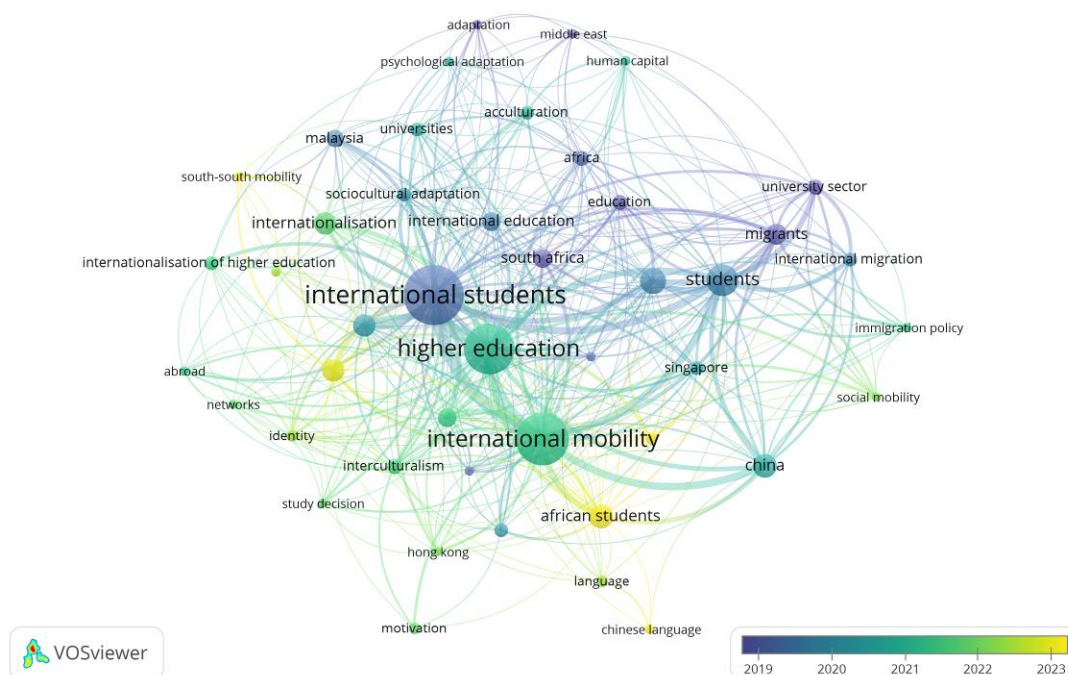

Figure 3. Overlay visualisation

As shown in Figure 3, the foundational keywords such as *international students*, *higher education*, *internationalisation*, and *students* are shaded in darker blue tones, indicating their sustained presence in earlier works and their continued relevance across the dataset. These terms represent well-established research areas and serve as the intellectual anchors of the field. Similarly, keywords related to institutional themes, such as *internationalisation of higher education*, *universities*, and *education*, also cluster around earlier periods, suggesting a strong initial emphasis on structural and policy-level studies.

In contrast, newer themes are represented in lighter green to yellow tones. Notably, keywords such as *language*, *motivation*, *networks*, *identity*, and *Chinese language* appear more recently, highlighting a shift in research attention toward micro-level, student-centered inquiries. This includes emerging interest in how linguistic challenges, personal motivations, and cultural identity shape students' experiences in diverse host countries, particularly in Asian contexts. The term *African students* also appear lighter, reflecting a growing interest in region-specific mobility patterns and intra-continental dynamics in recent years.

Overall, the overlay visualization reveals an evolution in the field from macro-level institutional and internationalisation concerns to more nuanced investigations of student experiences and socio-cultural dimensions. These patterns suggest that South–South mobility scholarship is increasingly moving beyond policy and structure to engage with issues of diversity, adaptation, and agency.

Patterns of South–South Student Mobility by Origin Region and Destination Country

To explore the geographic distribution of South–South student mobility research, a heatmap was generated to visualize the number of studies by origin region and destination country. The figure illustrates the concentration and directionality of mobility flows among Global South contexts based on empirical studies reviewed.
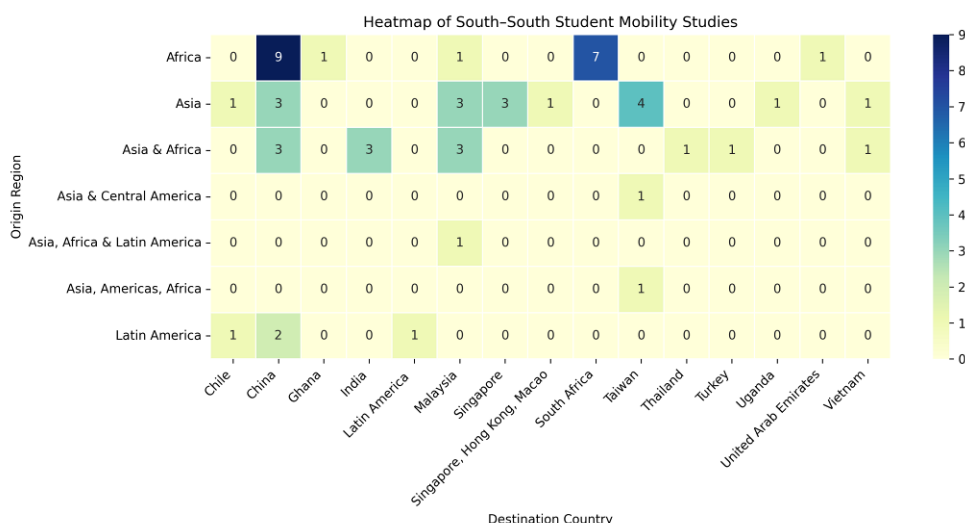

Figure 4. Heatmap of South–South student mobility studies

The heatmap reveals that China stands out as the most frequent destination, especially for students from Africa, Asia, and mixed-origin categories such as "Africa & Asia." South Africa also appears prominently as a host country for African students, indicating intra-African mobility trends. Malaysia is another significant destination, attracting students from Asia and combined regions like "Asia, Africa & Latin America." Meanwhile, Latin American students tend to study in China and Malaysia, albeit in smaller numbers. The presence of hybrid origin categories (e.g., "Asia & Africa") suggests that some studies did not isolate a single source region, highlighting the complex nature of South–South flows. The visual clustering reflects broader geopolitical and educational linkages within the Global South, reinforcing the role of regional hubs like China, Malaysia, and South Africa as major destinations for international education.

Moreover, to understand the research landscape and methodological trends in studies on South–South student mobility, all included articles were classified by their dominant method type. Table 2 presents the distribution of methodological approaches across the 81 empirical studies reviewed.

Table 2. Summary of methodological approaches used

Method Type	Number of Studies
Qualitative	49
Quantitative	23
Mixed Methods	9
Total	81

The results indicate a strong dominance of qualitative research methods, which comprised over 60% of the studies. These studies frequently utilized interviews, ethnographies, and case studies to explore students' experiences, motivations, and sociocultural adaptation. Quantitative research, though less prevalent, focused on measuring mobility patterns, destination choices, and institutional effects using survey-based designs. Fewer studies adopted mixed methods to integrate numerical data with in-depth qualitative narratives. The methodological distribution reflects the field's emphasis on rich, context-sensitive analysis suited to capturing the complexity of international student mobility in the Global South.

In addition to the dominant thematic areas identified, notable gaps and silences persist within the existing South–South mobility scholarship. Studies remain heavily concentrated on Africa–Asia mobility flows, particularly to China and Malaysia, while intra-Latin American mobility and mobility within Southeast Asia receive far less scholarly attention. Research focusing on lesser-studied regions, such as South–South flows involving the Pacific Islands or Central America, is almost absent. Methodologically, the field relies predominantly on qualitative case studies, with relatively few longitudinal designs or mixed methods approaches to capture the evolving and dynamic nature of mobility experiences over time. Moreover, while socio-cultural and institutional aspects are widely discussed, limited attention has been given to emerging areas such as digital experiences, virtual mobility programs, or the role of technology in shaping mobility patterns. These gaps highlight opportunities for future research to diversify geographical focus, innovate methodologically, and expand thematic exploration beyond conventional frameworks.

Discussion

This review examined the landscape of South–South student mobility research, revealing key patterns, thematic focuses, and notable research gaps. The findings suggest that while the scholarship in this area is thematically rich, it remains geographically concentrated and methodologically uneven, with a strong reliance on qualitative approaches.

First, the analysis highlights the continued concentration of studies on Africa–Asia and Asia–Asia mobility flows, with China, Malaysia, and South Africa serving as the most common destinations (Gbollie & Gong, 2020a; Wen & Hu, 2019; Xu & and Stahl, 2024). This concentration appears to be driven by several factors. For instance, these countries benefit from robust institutional capacities, historical investments in higher education, and targeted policy initiatives that prioritize internationalization. Such strategic measures have enabled them to develop well-established research infrastructures and attract scholars through decades of academic collaboration. In contrast, mobility within regions, such as Latin America–Latin America and Africa–Africa (beyond South Africa), remains underrepresented. This disparity likely reflects uneven levels of socio-economic development and resource allocation across the Global South. In many cases, only a select few countries have managed to evolve into academic hubs, while others lag behind due to limited funding, infrastructural challenges, or a less pronounced emphasis on international academic collaboration (Glass & Cruz, 2023). Encouragingly, recent studies have begun to document emerging destinations such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Uganda. For instance, Muslim et al. (2025) highlight how Indonesian universities actively try repositioning themselves as attractive destinations through academic branding and soft power strategies. Although these emerging cases are still in the early stages, their experiences indicate that policy-driven interventions can help balance the uneven mobility patterns observed within the Global South.

Second, the findings show that most research continues to focus on structural drivers influencing students' decision-making, particularly affordability, institutional reputation, and access

to better educational opportunities. While these factors are important, other dimensions of students' experiences are often overlooked. Recent works have begun to shed light on the growing importance of students' digital journeys (Chang et al., 2022; Fadhli et al., 2023). For instance, Qi et al. (2022) introduces the concept of "digital shock" to describe how international students in China experience unfamiliarity, excitement, and even anxiety when adapting to local digital infrastructures and platform cultures. These disruptions are not merely technical but deeply cultural, often making students feel disconnected despite being constantly online. Increasingly, students depend on digital platforms not only for academic engagement but also for social connection and everyday survival in host countries (Chang & Gomes, 2017). This emerging focus illustrates that international student mobility today encompasses both physical and digital spheres, requiring students to navigate complex online and offline environments simultaneously.

Third, methodologically, research on South–South mobility remains dominated by qualitative case studies (Wen & Hu, 2019; Glass & Cruz, 2023). Although these studies provide rich, in-depth insights, they often capture only snapshots of student experiences at a single point in time. For instance, Wen and Hu (2019) point out that while qualitative case studies help elucidate immediate challenges, they fall short of revealing how these challenges and coping strategies evolve over time. There is a noticeable lack of longitudinal and mixed-methods research that tracks how students' experiences—including shifts in their needs, coping mechanisms, and sense of belonging—adapt from pre-arrival expectations to post-settlement realities (Glass & Cruz, 2023). Without this temporal perspective, current studies offer only static portrayals rather than dynamic narratives of adaptation and transformation. Future research would benefit from following students over time, especially in capturing changes across both physical and digital dimensions of mobility.

Additionally, important aspects of international students' experiences remain underexplored. Few studies address how mobility is shaped by disaster contexts, such as natural hazards or political instability, or how mental health and wellbeing concerns affect students' adaptation processes in Global South destinations. Research in the Global North has increasingly acknowledged international students' mental health needs (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Mbous et al., 2024). However, similar concerns remain understudied in South–South contexts. These are gaps that deserve greater scholarly attention, especially considering the heightened vulnerabilities faced by students.

Finally, although interest in South–South student mobility has grown, much of the existing research still compares it to mobility to the Global North. This comparison can overlook the unique features and strengths of South–South experiences. Future studies should pay more attention to how students navigate and make meaning of their journeys in these contexts, including their motivations, challenges, and achievements.

In sum, while significant progress has been made, expanding regional coverage, exploring less traditional aspects of mobility, and adopting more diverse research methodologies are steps toward a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of South–South student mobility.

CONCLUSION

Our review highlights the development of South–South student mobility research, highlighting key trends, dominant thematic areas, and emerging gaps. The findings reveal that scholarship remains concentrated on specific regional flows, particularly Africa–Asia and Asia–Asia, with newer destinations such as Indonesia and Vietnam gradually entering the landscape. Thematically, while structural factors like affordability and institutional reputation continue to dominate, there is increasing recognition of students' digital journeys as an important aspect of their mobility experiences. Methodologically, qualitative approaches still prevail, with limited use of longitudinal or mixed methods designs to capture evolving student trajectories.

Despite notable progress, significant silences persist, particularly in the underrepresentation of Latin America–Latin America mobility and the continued framing of Global South pathways compared to Global North models. Future research should prioritize broader regional inclusivity, adopt frameworks that centre students' agency and diverse experiences, and explore how digital environments shape mobility beyond physical adaptation. Expanding

methodological diversity is also essential to deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding South–South student mobility. By addressing these areas, future scholarship can move toward a more critical, comprehensive, and context-sensitive understanding of mobility within and across Global South contexts. However, this review also has several limitations. First, the inclusion of only English-language peer-reviewed publications may have excluded relevant scholarship published in other languages, particularly from Latin America and Francophone Africa. Second, while bibliometric and thematic analyses provided valuable insights, the review did not include full-text content analysis, which may have limited the depth of interpretation regarding author perspectives or theoretical framing. Lastly, the scope of databases used, and the specific keyword combinations may have inadvertently overlooked relevant interdisciplinary or region-specific studies.

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Appendix 1.

Publication Trend by Year (n=81)