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Factors Impacting Tertiary-Level International Students' Mental Well-being: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT: *International students constitute a substantial proportion of the global tertiary education population, yet the factors impacting their mental well-being remain fragmented across the literature. This systematic review synthesizes peer-reviewed studies to identify key factors that impact international students' mental well-being and address research gaps. Using the PRISMA guidelines and the PICO tool, 86 studies were selected through a comprehensive search of eight databases. The findings indicate that more than 82% of the studies used quantitative methods and that more than 59% were conducted in English-speaking countries. Thematic analysis revealed nine interconnected factors impacting mental well-being: personal and psychological issues; sociocultural adjustment and acculturative stress; social support and belongingness; academic pressure; language and communication challenges; racism and xenophobia; visa policy-related stress; and housing and living conditions and financial pressure.*

Using an ecological framework, the results emphasize interactions among individual, relational, institutional, and structural determinants. This review underscores the need for longitudinal, mixed-methods research with greater geographic diversity to inform policy and practice.

Keywords: factors, international students, mental well-being, tertiary education, systematic literature review

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INTRODUCTION

International students pursuing higher education constitute a significant share of the global education sector. They play a crucial role in the social, cultural, and economic growth of host countries. In 2022, approximately 6.9 million students studied abroad (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024). During the 2023–2024 academic year, the United States recorded 1,126,690 international student enrollments (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2024), while Australia reported 1,095,298 enrollments (Department of Education, 2025).

International students pursuing tertiary education tend to experience greater psychological vulnerability than their domestic counterparts do (English Australia, 2018; Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Zhao et al., 2022b). Challenges such as transitioning into adulthood, living independently, and managing increased academic demands can be stressful for all students (Acharya, 2018). For international students, these stressors are compounded by cultural adjustment, language barriers, discrimination, and separation from family and social support networks (Clough et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2022b). As Forbes-Mewett (2019) noted, the frequency and severity of mental health problems among international students appear to be increasing.

Mental health concerns among international students have become an expanding area of scholarly inquiry. Numerous studies have examined the factors influencing mental well-being (Cao et al., 2021; Zhao, Houghton, & Glasgow, 2022). These factors range from personal characteristics such as age, gender, and personality to academic workload, financial stress, cultural differences, discrimination, and concerns about physical safety, including the fear of terrorism (Sarwar et al., 2020).

Several systematic reviews have examined international students' mental health, yet most are constrained by geographic focus, population specificity, or narrow thematic scope. Some reviews focus on single host countries, such as China (Wu et al., 2021) or Australia (Maharaj et al., 2025), whereas others examine Chinese international students across multiple destinations (Zuo et al., 2025; Ying et al., 2025). Four other reviews are issue-specific, addressing mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhao et al., 2022b; Ying et al., 2025) or focusing exclusively on depression or depressive symptoms (Saravanan et al., 2021; Tan Wen-Xuan et al., 2025). Comparative reviews, such as that by Xiong et al. (2024), examine differences between domestic and international students but do not focus on determinants unique to international student populations. Overall, existing reviews do not provide a comprehensive, global synthesis of the diverse factors impacting international students' mental well-being in the post-2015 period, underscoring the need for the present study. Appendix A summarizes the existing systematic literature and outlines its limitations.

The present study systematically reviewed and synthesized the literature on the mental well-being of tertiary-level international students published between January 2015 and April 2025. It addressed three key research questions:

1. What are the methodological trends in publications examining the factors that impact international students' mental well-being, and what gaps exist in this area?
2. What are the spatiotemporal trends in studies examining the factors impacting international students' mental well-being?
3. What factors potentially impact tertiary-level international students' mental well-being are being studied?

To support an analytically coherent synthesis, this review draws on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological framework offers a conceptual lens for situating inductively identified factors across interacting individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels, enabling a multilevel interpretation of international students' mental well-being.

METHOD

This study adopted a keyword-based strategy for the literature search and followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The study protocol was registered in PROSPERO (ID: CRD42024543347) and published on May 1, 2024.

For definitional clarity, the study adopted UNESCO’s (2024) definition of international students as individuals who cross national borders to pursue education in a foreign country without permanent residency status. Mental health and well-being were conceptualized using the World Health Organization’s (2024) definition of well-being, and tertiary-level students were defined as individuals enrolled in postsecondary education (UNESCO, 2024).

The Search String and Strategy

Research articles published between January 2015 and April 2025 were searched in EBSCOhost, Scopus, PubMed, ProQuest, Web of Science, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Informit (A+ Education). The search string was designed around three core themes—international students, mental health, and tertiary education—each with synonymous terms. The details of the search string, including its formula, for each database are presented in Appendix B.

Inclusion-Exclusion Criteria

The literature search was limited to peer-reviewed English-language journal articles published between January 1, 2015, and April 1, 2025. Studies were included if they (1) reported original empirical research, (2) involved international students enrolled in tertiary education, and (3) examined factors affecting mental health or well-being as primary outcomes. Studies were excluded if (1) they were not published in English; (2) they focused on domestic students, secondary-level students, or second-generation migrants; (3) they involved mixed cohorts without international student data; or (4) they did not examine mental health–related factors. The gray literature, dissertations, theses, review articles, editorials, book chapters, conference papers, and correspondence were also excluded.

Table 1: Population, Phenomenon of Interest, and Context (PICO) Framework for Inclusion and Exclusion

Criteria	Inclusion	Excluded
Population	International tertiary students	Domestic students, secondary-level students, and second-generation migrants
Phenomenon of Interest	Factors impacting mental health and well-being	Studies not examining mental health–related factors
Context	Tertiary education outside of the home country	Tertiary education inside the home country

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were guided by the population, phenomenon of interest, and context (PICO) framework (Lockwood et al., 2015), as summarized in Table 1. The PICO framework is well suited to systematic

reviews with exploratory or qualitative components, as it emphasizes participant characteristics, phenomena of interest, and contextual factors rather than interventions or comparisons.

Study Selection Process

All the retrieved records were imported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and duplicates were removed. Noneligible publication types (e.g., gray literature, dissertations, reviews, editorials, book chapters, conference papers, and correspondence) were excluded. Titles and abstracts were independently screened by the first and second authors, followed by full-text assessment against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were documented. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion with the third and fourth authors. The study selection process is presented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1).

Quality Appraisal

Study quality was appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018), which includes two screening items and five design-specific criteria for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. The appraisal was conducted independently by the first three authors, with disagreements resolved by consensus. Studies were evaluated at the item and domain levels. Overall, qualitative studies demonstrated appropriate designs and analytic coherence, with some variability in reflexivity reporting. Quantitative studies generally met the criteria for measurement validity and sampling, although limitations related to response rates and confounding were noted. The mixed-methods studies satisfied the core integration criteria but varied in the depth of integration. Detailed appraisal results are provided in Appendix C.

The Selection Outcomes

The database search identified 6,189 records across eight databases. After 4,489 duplicates and 285 ineligible publication types were removed, 1,415 records were screened by title and abstract, resulting in the exclusion of 1,034 records. A full-text assessment was conducted for 381 articles, 295 of which were excluded because they did not focus on international students ($n = 27$), did not examine mental health-related determinants ($n = 238$), or were not original research ($n = 30$). A total of 86 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The study selection process is illustrated in Figure 1.

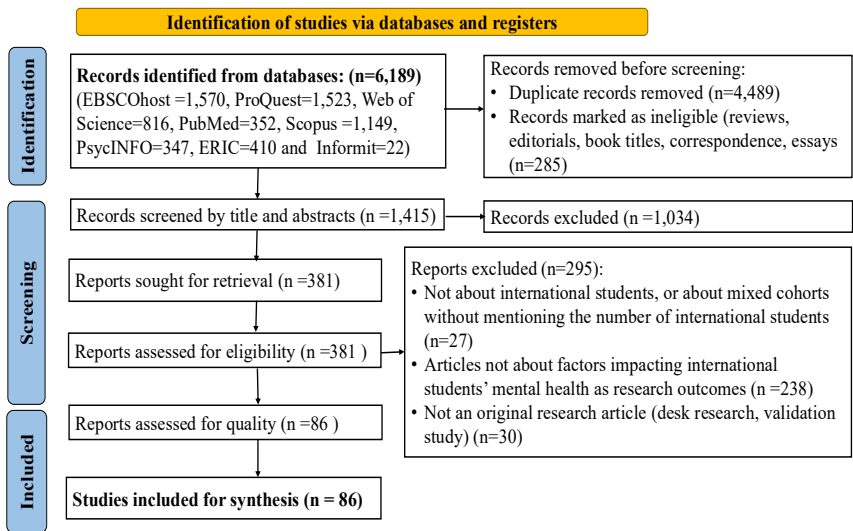


Figure 1: Literature search and inclusion-exclusion process (PRISMA framework)

Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

A structured thematic synthesis was conducted to identify the factors influencing international students’ mental well-being. Study characteristics (e.g., authorship, year, country, design, sample, and key findings) were extracted into a standardized spreadsheet. An inductive codebook was developed through iterative review of study findings and refined via constant comparison across studies. Codes were subsequently grouped into nine higher-order themes representing distinct domains of influence.

Coding was performed independently by the first three authors, with discrepancies resolved through consensus. The synthesis emphasized thematic patterns in the reported findings rather than effect-size estimation. To support transparency and reproducibility, a study-by-theme matrix mapping each included study to the nine thematic domains is provided in Appendix D.

RESULTS

Bibliometric Findings

The 86 studies included in this review were published across 50 academic journals. The *Journal of International Students* published the greatest number of articles (n = 9), followed by the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (n = 7) and the *Journal of American College Health* (n = 5). Other recurring outlets included *PLOS ONE*, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *BMC Psychiatry*, and the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (n = 3).

Overall, more than 92% of the included studies were published in journals based in the United States ($n = 35$), Switzerland ($n = 18$), and the United Kingdom ($n = 20$), indicating an intense geographic concentration of scholarly output.

The publication volume increased steadily over time, with notable growth after 2020. Fewer than one-third of the studies ($n = 24$) were published between 2015 and 2019, whereas more than 72% ($n = 62$) appeared between 2020 and 2025. Peaks occurred in 2021 ($n = 18$) and 2023 ($n = 17$), reflecting heightened research attention during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodologically, the literature was dominated by quantitative designs. More than 82% of the studies ($n = 72$) used quantitative methods, primarily cross-sectional surveys ($n = 64$), with only a few longitudinal studies ($n = 8$). Qualitative approaches accounted for 12 studies, most of which relied on semistructured interviews, with one ethnographic study (Dovchin, 2020) and one virtual focus group study (Koo & Nyunt, 2023). Only two studies applied mixed-method designs, combining surveys and interviews within case-study approaches (Seo et al., 2023; Shan et al., 2020).

Geographically, more than half of the studies (59%, $n = 51$) were conducted in four English-speaking host countries: the United States ($n = 34$), Australia ($n = 12$), the United Kingdom ($n = 4$), and New Zealand ($n = 1$). China accounted for seven studies, while Germany and Malaysia each contributed four. All other countries were represented by a single study, highlighting limited geographic diversity.

Across all the studies, the total sample size was 53,654 participants. Quantitative studies accounted for the majority ($n = 53,354$; mean = 789 per study), whereas qualitative studies included 300 participants in total (mean = 25 per study). Most studies ($n = 74$) focused exclusively on international students, with 48 examining international students broadly and others concentrating on specific groups—most commonly Chinese international students ($n = 11$). The participants were predominantly 25–36 years of age, and nearly all the studies were sex-inclusive, with only two applying sex- or marital-status-specific sampling criteria.

Thematic Findings: Factors Impacting the Mental Well-being of International Students

Across the 86 included studies, nine interrelated factors influencing international students' mental well-being were identified (Figure 2). Personal and psychological factors were most frequently reported ($n = 50$), followed by social support and belonging ($n = 34$) and racism and xenophobia ($n = 23$). A moderate body of evidence addressed sociocultural adjustment and acculturative stress ($n = 22$), academic pressure ($n = 19$), housing and living conditions ($n = 18$), and language and communication difficulties ($n = 18$). In contrast, fewer studies have examined financial pressure ($n = 9$) and visa-policy-related stressors ($n = 10$). Overall, the distribution of evidence indicates a greater emphasis on individual and interpersonal stressors than on structural or policy determinants.

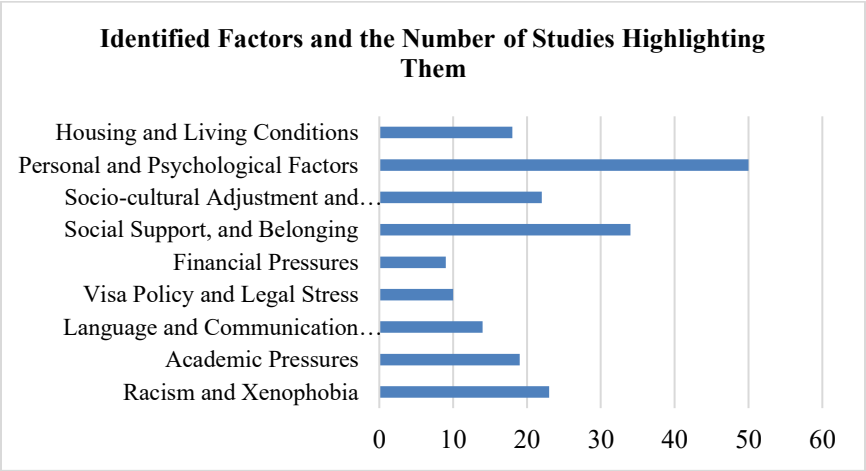


Figure 2: Factors Identified through Selected Studies and the Count of Studies Highlighting Them.

To provide an analytical framework for these findings, the nine themes were mapped onto Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as illustrated in Figure 3. Microsystem influences included personal and psychological vulnerabilities, language difficulties, and acculturative stress.

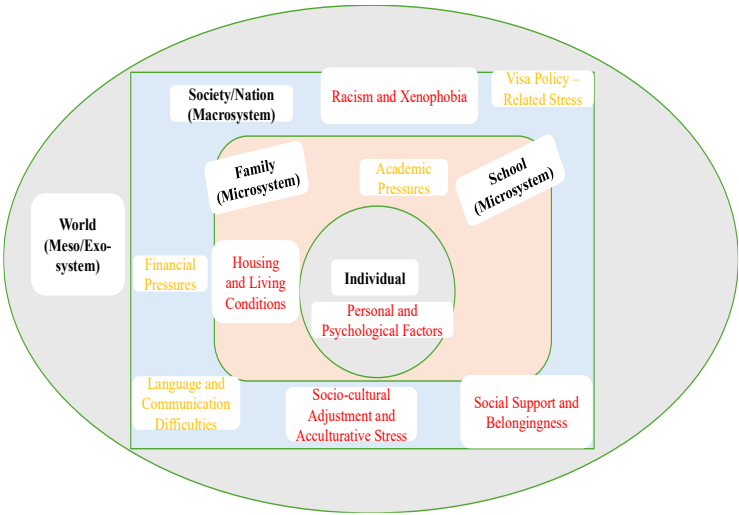


Figure 3: Ecological Systems Framework: Illustrating the Multilevel Determinants of International Students’ Mental Well-being.

Mesosystem factors included relational and institutional interactions, such as social support, belonging, and academic pressure. Exosystem influences reflected broader institutional and material conditions, including financial strain and accommodation challenges, whereas macrosystem factors included structural forces such as racism, discrimination, and visa or policy uncertainty. This ecological framing highlights how mental well-being among international students is shaped by interacting influences across multiple levels rather than by isolated factors.

DISCUSSION

Methodological Trend

The reviewed literature is dominated by quantitative cross-sectional designs, which are more time- and cost-efficient; however, they provide only limited snapshots and do not capture the overall trajectory of students' mental health. The relative scarcity of qualitative, mixed-methods, and longitudinal studies restricts the understanding of how mental health challenges develop and change over time. This methodological imbalance highlights a critical gap and underscores the need for more diverse and longitudinal approaches in future research on international students' mental health and well-being.

Spatiotemporal Trend

The spatial distribution of studies reveals a pronounced geographic imbalance in research on international students' mental health. More than 43% of the included studies focused on students in the United States, even though the country hosts approximately 16% of the global international student population (Project Atlas, 2024). In contrast, substantially fewer studies have examined other major destination countries, including Australia, China, the United Kingdom, Germany, Malaysia, and Japan, indicating limited empirical coverage across most host contexts.

The literature predominantly focuses on students from Asian backgrounds, particularly those from China, reflecting global mobility patterns (OECD, 2024). However, this emphasis has left students from other major source countries, including India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, France, Korea, and the United States, with comparatively little attention. As a result, existing evidence may be insufficient to capture the diversity of international students' experiences, which are shaped by varying cultural, educational, and policy environments.

Although publication volume has increased markedly over time, signaling the growing recognition of international students' mental health as a global issue, the persistence of geographic and demographic clustering underscores the need for more contextually diverse and globally representative research.

Factors Impacting International Students' Mental Health

The reviewed studies identified nine interrelated factors that shape international students' mental well-being (Figure 2): personal and psychological factors; sociocultural adjustment and acculturative stress; social support and belonging; academic pressures; language and communication challenges; racism and xenophobia; visa- and policy-related stress; and housing and living conditions and financial pressures. Together, these factors reflect influences operating across individual, relational, institutional, and structural levels:

Personal and Psychological Factors

Personal and psychological factors emerged as the most prominent influences on international students' mental health and well-being, underscoring the central role of individual vulnerability at the microsystem level. In the literature, demographic attributes and psychological resources are consistently linked to mental health. Distress varies by sex, age, marital status, and physical health, and several studies have reported heightened vulnerability among female students, although the findings are context dependent (Aggarwal & Ciftci, 2021; Nahidi et al., 2018; Xiong & Pillay, 2023). Psychological resources such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and perceived control are associated with increased distress and reduced adaptive capacity (Du et al., 2023; Sabouripour et al., 2021).

Coping styles and behavioral orientations shape mental health trajectories, with adaptive strategies—such as problem-focused coping and emotional regulation—supporting resilience, whereas avoidant coping, maladaptive perfectionism, and withdrawal are associated with poorer outcomes (Akhtar & Kroener-Herwig, 2019; Dorevitch et al., 2020). Engagement in physical, social, and extracurricular activities consistently served as a protective factor, whereas social withdrawal heightened vulnerability (Kono et al., 2015; Yim et al., 2023).

From an ecological perspective, personal and psychological factors constitute the most proximal level of influence. However, their impact is amplified by pressures originating beyond the individual, reinforcing the need for multilevel interventions that address both personal coping capacity and contextual stressors.

Sociocultural Adjustment and Acculturative Stress

Sociocultural adjustment and acculturative stress emerged as prominent determinants of international students' mental well-being. Across studies, cultural differences, cultural distance, and difficulties adapting to host norms were consistently associated with elevated levels of psychological distress (Bethel et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2019; Ogunsanya et al., 2018; Shan et al., 2020). In contrast, protective factors include cultural intelligence, positive acculturation attitudes, meaningful engagement with the host community, inclusive classroom environments, and supportive peer relationships (Bethel et al., 2020; Gebregergis et al., 2019; Li et al., 2023; Shafaei et al., 2018).

Cultural background, identity issues, and awareness of racial and cultural positioning further shape coping strategies and help-seeking behaviors (Knettel et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). These dynamics are closely linked to loneliness, cultural mistrust, and perceived marginalization, which together contribute to psychological distress (Al-Krenawi et al., 2021; Brunsting et al., 2021). From an ecological perspective, acculturative stress reflects the interaction between individual adaptation demands at the microsystem level and broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts operating across the meso- and macrosystems.

Social Support and Belonging

Social support and belonging emerged as closely linked determinants of international students' mental health and well-being. Social support—defined as emotional and instrumental assistance from family, peers, faculty, and institutions (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2017)—and a sense of belonging, reflecting perceived inclusion and connectedness, were consistently associated with psychological outcomes across the reviewed studies.

Despite expectations of support from both home and host contexts, international students frequently report limited assistance from family, peers, and university staff (Dong et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2019). Strong support networks are associated with reduced stress and improved mental well-being, whereas social isolation and perceived exclusion predict greater psychological distress (Du et al., 2023; Ke et al., 2023; Li & Peng, 2019; Nahidi et al., 2018; Shadowen et al., 2019).

From an ecological perspective, social support and belonging operate primarily at the mesosystem level, shaped by interactions within academic and social environments and influenced by broader cultural and institutional contexts. These findings highlight social support and belonging as key protective resources—and their absence as a significant source of vulnerability—for international students' mental well-being.

Academic Pressures

Academic pressure emerged as a significant determinant of international students' mental health and well-being. Frequently reported stressors include examination anxiety, assessment demands, heavy coursework, language-related academic challenges, self-imposed performance expectations, concerns about timely degree completion, limited access to academic support services, and the ability to meet parental expectations (Koo et al., 2021; Lian & Wallace, 2020; Marangell & Baik, 2022; Yuan et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2017). In contrast, higher academic self-efficacy and satisfaction were consistently associated with better mental health outcomes, whereas low confidence and academic disengagement were consistently associated with poorer adjustment (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2017).

Difficulties in adapting to unfamiliar pedagogical approaches and assessment systems have also been widely reported, reflecting the misalignment between students' prior educational experiences and the host institution's expectations

(Zhao et al., 2023). These pressures were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with disrupted learning routines, time-zone-related sleep disruption, reduced interaction, uncertainty about academic progress, and limited opportunities for skill development (Koo & Nyunt, 2023; Lin et al., 2022). From an ecological perspective, academic pressures operate primarily at the mesosystem level and are shaped by interactions among individual capacities, instructional practices, and institutional structures.

Racism and Xenophobia

Racism, discrimination, and xenophobia were consistently identified as significant determinants of international students' mental health and well-being. Both perceived discrimination and direct experiences of racism are strongly associated with psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and reduced well-being (Ali et al., 2024; Iorga et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2022). Reported experiences range from subtle exclusion and linguistic discrimination to overt harassment, bullying, and hate incidents (Dong et al., 2023; Maleku et al., 2022; Suh et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2022a).

Evidence indicates that racist and xenophobic experiences intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for students of Asian descent, with studies documenting increased frequency, visibility, and psychological impact of such incidents (Koo & Nyunt, 2023; Xiong et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021). Although racism predates the pandemic, its amplification during this period highlights international students' heightened vulnerability during sociopolitical crises.

From an ecological perspective, racism and xenophobia operate primarily at the macrosystem level, reflecting structural inequalities, racialized discourses, and policy environments within host societies. These forces interact with microsystem and mesosystem factors—such as identity, belonging, and social support—to compound psychological distress, positioning discrimination as a structural determinant of international students' mental health rather than as an isolated interpersonal experience.

Language and Communication Difficulties

Language and communication difficulties were identified as important determinants of international students' mental well-being. Language difficulties affect mental health through three interconnected pathways. First, inadequate language competence heightened acculturative stress by constraining students' ability to engage with the host culture and manage everyday interactions (Al-Krenawi et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2019). Second, language barriers intensify academic pressure by limiting classroom participation, assessment performance, and communication with teaching staff (Koo et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). Third, linguistic differences increase vulnerability to social exclusion and discrimination (Dovchin, 2020; Wei et al., 2015). From an ecological perspective, language operates as a cross-cutting factor at the microsystem and mesosystem levels, shaping academic engagement, social inclusion, and cultural adjustment and

thereby exerting a pervasive influence on international students' mental well-being.

Accommodation and Living Conditions

Accommodation and living conditions emerged as salient environmental determinants of international students' mental health and well-being. Housing insecurity, safety concerns, and limited access to reliable information or support services were consistently associated with psychological distress. Safety-related stressors have been reported across residential, campus, and broader community settings (Maffini, 2018; Russell et al., 2023; Sarwar et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence indicates that experiences of victimization or perceived lack of safety in residential environments heighten stress and undermine well-being among international students (Maffini, 2018). Broader environmental threats, including concerns about public safety and political instability, were also linked to poorer mental health outcomes (Sarwar et al., 2020). From an ecological perspective, accommodation and living conditions primarily operate at the exosystem level, indirectly shaping mental health through daily stability, perceived safety, and access to supportive resources within host contexts.

Visa Policy-Related Stress

Visa regulations and legal conditions emerged as significant structural stressors that affect international students' mental health and well-being. Restrictive policies governing stay duration, work hours, and poststudy employment have consistently been linked to heightened psychological distress and uncertainty (Kamardeen & Sunindijo, 2018; Koo et al., 2021; Lian & Wallace, 2020; Zhou et al., 2017). Several studies have reported that abrupt and unpredictable policy changes intensified anxiety, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dong, 2023; Ke et al., 2023; Koo & Nyunt, 2023). From an ecological perspective, visa and policy stressors operate primarily at the macrosystem level, producing institutionalized uncertainty that interacts with students' academic and career trajectories to intensify psychological vulnerability.

Financial Pressures

Financial pressure emerged as a strong but less frequently reported determinant of international students' mental health and well-being. Although financial strain was reported across contexts, its limited representation suggests that it remains underexamined in the mental health literature. Evidence indicates that financial vulnerability intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with job losses, unstable income, and increased remittance obligations exacerbating psychological distress (Redfern, 2016; Wang et al., 2023). From an ecological perspective, financial pressures operate primarily at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, reflecting institutional fee structures, labor regulations, and

broader economic conditions that indirectly but powerfully shape international students' mental well-being.

LIMITATIONS

This review has several limitations. The evidence base is uneven, with a concentration of studies from Western host countries—particularly the United States and Australia—limiting global representativeness. Only English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles were included, which may introduce language and publication bias. Methodological heterogeneity across studies, including varied designs and reliance on self-reported outcomes, precluded quantitative synthesis. Finally, although both pre- and post-COVID-19 studies were included, rapid pandemic-related changes may limit the temporal generalizability of findings on discrimination, financial hardship, and visa uncertainty.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Mitigating international students' mental health stressors requires coordinated action across universities, education agents, and policy makers.

- Education providers should prioritize culturally responsive and language-concordant counseling; embed mental health literacy, coping skills, and academic writing support in curricula; and strengthen peer mentoring, cohort-based learning, and inclusive campus engagement to address personal distress, language barriers, academic pressures, and deficits in belonging.
- Clear and trusted mechanisms for reporting discrimination and inclusive institutional policies are essential to counter racism and xenophobia.
- Integrated immigration and career advising services, transparent communication about visa changes, and proactive guidance on poststudy pathways may reduce the uncertainty and stress surrounding visas and careers.
- Expanded hardship funds, financial counseling, fee payment plans, and housing support can mitigate financial and housing-related stress, particularly during periods of crisis.
- Education agents play a key role by providing realistic predeparture information on academic expectations, cultural adjustment, living costs, and support services, thereby reducing expectation–reality gaps.

At the policy level, greater transparency in visa regulations, alignment between education and migration policies, and sustained investment in infrastructure for student well-being are critical to addressing structural vulnerabilities that exacerbate psychological distress.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesized global evidence published between 2015 and 2025 and identified nine interrelated determinants that shape tertiary-level

international students' mental health and well-being. Anchored in an ecological framework, the findings demonstrate how individual vulnerabilities interact with relational, institutional, and structural conditions, with strong evidence for personal and psychological factors, social support and belonging, sociocultural adjustment, and academic pressure. The postpandemic literature further highlights the growing salience of structural stressors, including discrimination, financial precarity, and visa-related stress.

The review also reveals key gaps in the evidence base. Methodologically, the dominance of cross-sectional survey designs limits the understanding of causal pathways and mental health trajectories over time. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research is needed to capture the dynamic interactions among mental health determinants across ecological levels.

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