

Mapping the Emotional Geographies of International Students in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: In recent decades, the internationalization of higher education has intensified global student mobility. While research has extensively covered cognitive and sociocultural dimensions of student transition, the emotional and affective domains remain underexplored. This systematic literature review, guided by the PRISMA framework, synthesizes peer-reviewed scholarship (2000-2025) on the emotional geographies of international students in higher education. From 112 screened records, 38 studies met the inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis revealed five interconnected dimensions: (1) emotional place-making and belonging, (2) academic emotions and epistemic access, (3) relational and intercultural affect, (4) institutional care geographies, and (5) emotional resilience and agency. The findings demonstrate that affect is central not peripheral to the international student journey, mediating adaptation, learning, and well-being. The review identifies a predominance of qualitative studies in Anglo-Western contexts and calls for longitudinal, mixed-methods research in diverse settings, informed by critical and decolonial frameworks. Practical implications advocate for affect-sensitive pedagogy, emotionally supportive institutional design, and policies that recognize the emotional labor of student mobility. The novelty of this review lies in its explicit spatial-affective lens, consolidating a fragmented field and shifting the discourse from cognitive adjustment to embodied emotional experience. This study contributes a comprehensive conceptual framework to guide future research and offers evidence-based rationale for transforming institutional policy and student support services towards more holistic, emotionally attuned practices.

Keywords: Affective Domain, Emotional Geography, Higher Education, International Students

A. Introduction

Globalization and the internationalization of higher education have transformed the mobility landscape of students. Higher education institutions across the world host increasing numbers of students from different national and cultural backgrounds, and the literature on international students has grown accordingly. Much of this literature

focuses on academic adjustment, language acquisition, sociocultural adaptation and employability outcomes. Yet, there is growing recognition that these mobilities are emotional journeys as much as intellectual ones: students bring hopes, anxieties, attachments, dislocations and emotional labor, often navigating unfamiliar cultural, spatial and institutional terrains.

The concept of emotional geography offers a useful lens through which to understand how emotions are both shaped by, and shape, the spatial and social geographies of higher education contexts. Originally rooted in human geography, emotional geography explores how feelings, affect and emotional attachments are embedded in places, movements and subjectivities (Bondi, et al., 2005). Research in education has increasingly begun to pay attention to emotional geographies of schooling, learning and mobility (Finn, 2017). Correspondingly, the experiences of international students whose mobility necessarily involves new places, geographies of belonging, institutional geographies and emotions of displacement are ripe for an affective reading

This review adopts a broad focus on higher education (rather than limiting to specific national systems or disciplinary fields) in order to capture cross-contextual patterns and insights. Ultimately, the aim is to position emotion and affect not as ancillary to the international student experience but as integral. By bringing emotional geography into dialogue with international student studies, this review contributes both theoretically and practically to the design of more affect-informed support systems, pedagogy, and institutional policy.

We undertake a systematic literature review (SLR) of research on emotional geography and the affective domains of international students in higher education. This paper synthesizes 25 years of research on emotional geography and affective domains in higher education, focusing on international students as subjects of mobility and affect. The review addresses three central questions: (1) How has emotional geography been conceptualized in higher education research? (2) What affective domains dominate international student studies?

B. Methods

This systematic literature review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). The literature search was conducted across five databases Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar and was completed on 15 March 2025. The review covered publications from January 2000 to March 2025. The lower boundary of 2000 was selected because research on *emotional geography* and *affect theory* began to consolidate as a distinct analytical framework in the early 2000s, particularly following foundational contributions in human geography and sociology of emotion

(e.g., Anderson & Smith, 2001; Ahmed, 2004; Bondi et al., 2005). This period therefore captures the emergence and development of affect-oriented scholarship relevant to higher education and international student mobility.

1. Scopus and web science: (“emotional geography” OR “affect*” OR “emotion*”) AND (“international student*” OR “student mobility”) AND (“higher education” OR “university”)
2. ERIC & PsycINFO: (“emotion*” OR “affective domain”) AND (“international students”) AND (“higher education”)
3. Google Scholar: (“emotional geography” AND “international students”)

Grey literature (e.g., theses, institutional reports, policy documents) was not included in the review. This decision was made to ensure analytical consistency and methodological rigor by focusing exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles, which form the primary knowledge base for theoretical and empirical development in this field. In addition, screening was performed independently by at least two reviewers, with conflicts resolved by a third. This is crucial for reproducibility and rigor.

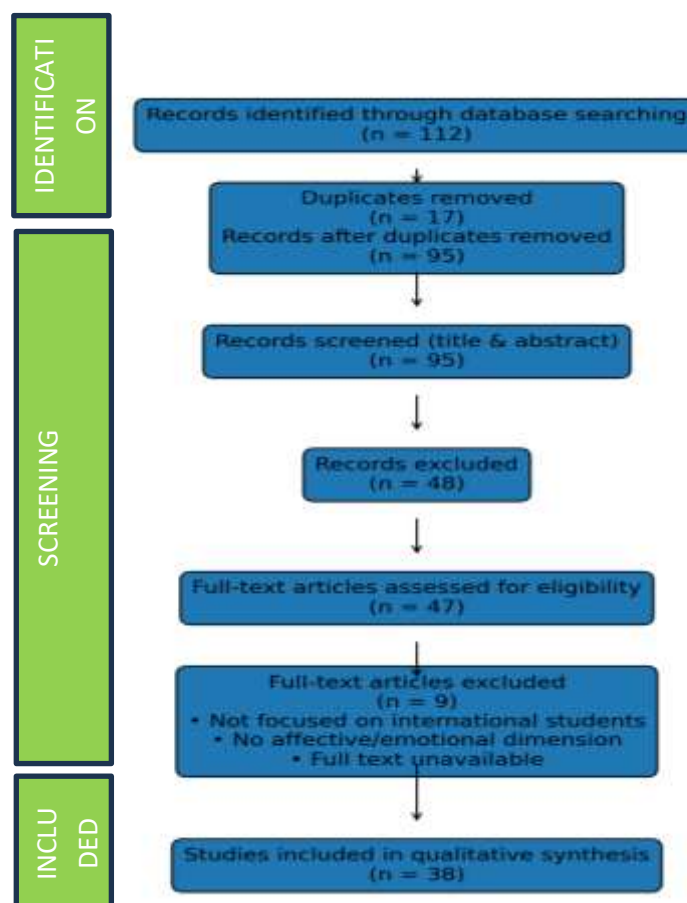


Figure 1 Prisma Diagram

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1. Peer-reviewed empirical or conceptual articles published between 2000 and 2025 (inclusive)	1. Studies not involving international students (e.g., only domestic students)
2. English language	2. Studies focusing purely on cognitive or linguistic adaptation without any emotional/affective dimension
3. Focus on international students in higher education contexts	3. Non-peer-reviewed works (book chapters, editorials, opinion pieces)
4. Explicit discussion of emotions, affective domains, or emotional geography/spatial affect	4. Studies where full text was not accessible.
5. Available full-text	

Initial database searches yielded 112 records. Duplicates were removed, after which 95 remained. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, resulting in 48 full-text articles retrieved. After applying eligibility criteria, 38 articles were included in the final analytic sample. Information extracted from each article included: author(s), year, country/host context, student level and origin, theoretical framework, methodology (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), key findings relevant to emotions/affect and space/geography, and identified limitations.

Data extraction and synthesis were conducted using a thematic synthesis approach as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), which is well suited to integrating qualitative, mixed-method, and conceptually heterogeneous studies. A structured data extraction matrix was developed to systematically capture key characteristics of each included study, including: author(s), year of publication, host country/context, participant characteristics, methodological design, theoretical framework, and principal findings related to emotions, affect, and spatial experience.

The thematic synthesis proceeded in three iterative stages. First, all relevant sections of the included articles (e.g., findings, discussion, and analytically rich excerpts) were subjected to line-by-line open coding. Initial codes were inductively generated to remain close to the language and meaning of the original studies, particularly where emotions, affective responses, spatial relations, and institutional contexts were described. Second, these initial codes were examined for conceptual similarity and grouped into descriptive themes that captured recurring affective patterns across studies (e.g., belonging, anxiety, relational support, institutional care). At this stage, coding focused on organizing the data rather than theorizing it. Third, the descriptive themes were further interpreted and refined into analytical themes through an emotional geography lens. This involved examining how affective experiences were produced and mediated through space, mobility, institutional structures, and social relations. The final analytical themes represent higher-order interpretations that go

beyond individual studies and articulate shared conceptual insights across the dataset.

To enhance rigor and reliability, coding was conducted independently by two reviewers during the first and second stages of synthesis. Coding outputs were then compared and discussed in regular analytic meetings. Disagreements in coding or theme allocation were resolved through iterative discussion and reflexive dialogue, with reference back to the original texts to ensure interpretive fidelity. Where consensus could not initially be reached, codes were revisited, redefined, or merged until agreement was achieved. This collaborative process reduced individual interpretive bias and strengthened the credibility of the thematic synthesis. Given the methodological diversity of the included studies and the predominance of qualitative and conceptual designs, a quantitative meta-analysis was not appropriate. Instead, the review prioritised conceptual integration and theoretical coherence, enabling a nuanced understanding of emotional geographies and affective domains in higher education.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The conceptualizations of emotional geography in higher education research

Of the 38 included articles: 1) 24 were qualitative, 9 mixed-methods, 5 purely quantitative; 2) Geographical host contexts: Australia (10), United Kingdom (8), United States (6), Canada (4), various Asian contexts (7), Europe (3); and 3) Theoretical frameworks referenced: emotional geography (Bondi et al., 2005), affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), sociocultural learning theory, institutional care geographies, and transnational education theories.

2. Dominating Affective Domains in International Student Studies.

Participant populations: primarily undergraduate international students, with a smaller number of postgraduate learners; majority from East-Asia, South-Asia, Middle-East origins. The thematic synthesis led to the identification of five interrelated analytical themes:

a. Emotional Place-Making and Belonging

Many studies highlighted how international students engage emotionally with places their home country, the host country, campus spaces, accommodation, and social spaces. These places evoke emotions of attachment, alienation, longing, and hybridity. For instance, students described feelings of displacement when arriving at host institutions, nostalgia for home, and ambivalence toward on-campus spaces that did not feel culturally safe. Place-making emerged as an active emotional process:

students sought to claim or create places of belonging (e.g., student lounges, cultural associations) in unfamiliar landscapes. International students actively construct emotional attachments to spaces such as campuses, dormitories, and cities. These spaces evoke feelings of belonging, alienation, and hybridity. Place-making becomes an emotional act of negotiating home and identity (Madge et al., 2015; Tran & Vu, 2018).

b. Academic Emotions and Epistemic Access

Affective dimensions of academic life appear dominant: emotions of anxiety, shame, pride, confidence, frustration, and excitement were prominent. These emotions were mediated by language proficiency, prior schooling culture, classroom participation norms, and assessment practices. Some students reported feeling “invisible” in class because of linguistic/cultural differences; others felt empowered when supported by faculty or peers. The theme emphasizes that emotional experiences are deeply bound to epistemic access how students feel they belong to the knowledge community. Emotions such as anxiety, shame, and pride regulate participation and learning. Affective exclusion often parallels epistemic exclusion when students feel linguistically or culturally marginalized (Yu & Wright, 2016).

c. Relational and Intercultural Affect

International student experiences are richly relational and affective: friendships, peer networks, mentoring relationships, faculty-student interactions are emotional sites. Emotions identified included trust, empathy, shame (in cross-cultural mistakes), gratitude, isolation, and microaggression-induced anger. Several studies documented how social networks mitigate emotional stress and support adaptation; conversely, experiences of exclusion, xenophobia or non-inclusive pedagogy heightened affective dissonance. The intercultural dimension is deeply affective students’ emotions are entangled with cultural identity work, belonging/un-belonging, and relational geography.

d. Institutional Care Geographies

Institutional spaces (international offices, orientation programs, counselling services), and how they are configured, carry emotional weight. Students reported that supportive institutional practices fostered emotional safety and belonging; in contrast, bureaucratic, indifferent, or culturally insensitive support structures produced alienation and emotional fatigue. This theme highlights the emotional geography of care: how institutions structure spaces, services and relationships that carry affective significance. Institutional geographies thus mediate how students feel about their mobility, their study environment, and their place in the host campus. Institutional structures counselling, international offices, classrooms shape emotional safety.

Supportive care infrastructures foster belonging; bureaucratic indifference amplifies alienation (Yeh et al., 2022).

e. Emotional Resilience and Agency

Beyond negative affective experiences, many studies emphasized student resilience, reflexivity and emotional agency. International students described developing emotional coping mechanisms, reframing mobility as growth, leveraging peer support, developing intercultural emotional literacy, and actively constructing affective belonging. The theme foregrounds that emotions are not only reactions but resources for learning and adaptation. Emotional resilience emerges as a dynamic process: students negotiate their emotional geographies, navigate affective dislocations, and re-construct belonging. Students develop emotional literacy and resilience, transforming vulnerability into agency. Emotions become resources for adaptation and self-formation (Tran & Pham, 2020).

This review underscores that affect and emotional geography are central not peripheral to the international student experience in higher education. The five identified themes collectively demonstrate that emotions are woven through spatial, mobility, institutional and relational dimensions of study abroad. First, placing emotional geography at the center allows us to reconceptualize international student mobility from a purely cognitive/language adjustment model to one in which feelings of belonging, attachment, dislocation and emotional labor are key (Bondi, et al., 2005; Hargreaves, 2001). This perspective aligns with Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labor, which conceptualizes the management of feeling as structured by social and institutional contexts a useful frame for understanding how students regulate emotion to conform to academic and cultural expectations. The place-making theme highlights that place are felt, not just inhabited, and Massey's (1994) idea of space as relational and dynamic.

The academic emotion's theme shows that emotional experience is integral to epistemic inclusion, resonating with Pekrun's (2006) control-value theory of achievement emotions, which posits that emotions directly shape motivation and learning. The relational affect theme foregrounds that peer and intercultural relationships are emotional geographies. This finding is supported by Ahmed's (2004) affective economies, which frame emotion as circulating between bodies to produce attachments and boundaries, which helps explain the affective need for security and belonging in unfamiliar social contexts. The institutional care geography's theme emphasizes that universities' spatial and service infrastructures matter emotionally, institutions have moral responsibilities to cultivate environments of emotional safety and reciprocity (Noddings, 2003).

Finally, resilience and agency point to the active emotional work students perform consistent with Bandura's (2001) concept of human agency and Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, both of which highlight emotional regulation and intrinsic motivation as central to learning autonomy. Second, this review surfaces key gaps. A majority of studies are cross-sectional and qualitative, with limited longitudinal empirical work tracking emotional trajectories over time. The host contexts are heavily weighted toward Anglo-Western countries; non-Anglo settings remain under-explored.

The theoretical framing often remains descriptive; few studies fully integrate critical emotional geography (Anderson & Smith, 2001) or intersectional frameworks (Crenshaw, 1991) that interrogate power, race, gender, mobility, and affect in layered ways. Methodologically, the measurement of affect largely relies on interviews and self-reports; there is limited mixed-method or quantitative measurement of emotional geographies (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Third, practical implications deserve emphasis: if institutions understand emotional geographies of international students, they can configure supportive spaces, orientation programs, peer mentoring and academic pedagogy that attend to affect, not only cognition. This aligns with social-emotional learning theory Vygotskian sociocultural theory (1978), both of which stress that emotional and social processes are integral to cognitive development. Designing campus spaces that promote cross-cultural emotional safety, embedding faculty development in intercultural emotional pedagogy (Tran & Pham, 2020), and constructing institutional frameworks attentive to affective dimensions of student mobility would thus advance both inclusion and academic success.

D. Conclusions

This systematic literature review establishes that the emotional geographies of international students are a fundamental, yet complex, dimension of higher education mobility. The key finding is that affect is not peripheral but central to the student experience, crystallizing in five interconnected themes: emotional place-making and belonging; academic emotions and epistemic access; relational and intercultural affect; institutional care geographies; and emotional resilience and agency. These themes collectively demonstrate how emotions are spatially mediated, shaped by institutional environments, interpersonal interactions, and personal negotiations across cultural boundaries. The practical implications are significant and demand a paradigm shift in institutional approaches. Universities must evolve from providing predominantly cognitive-academic support to implementing holistic, affect-sensitive ecosystems. This entails: 1) intentionally designing welcoming physical and social campus spaces that facilitate belonging; 2) training faculty and staff in intercultural emotional pedagogy and the principles of institutional care; 3) developing programs that explicitly address the emotional challenges of mobility, such as orientation and ongoing mentoring; and 4) ensuring support services are culturally responsive.

Ultimately, institutional policy must recognize and resource the "emotional labour" of internationalization, fostering environments where emotional well-being is seen as a prerequisite for academic success. To advance this crucial field, future research should pursue several directions. Longitudinal studies are needed to map the dynamic evolution of emotional geographies across the entire mobility continuum. Research must also expand beyond dominant Anglo contexts to explore diverse host environments and underrepresented student cohorts. Methodologically, employing mixed-methods designs can bridge qualitative depth with quantitative measurement of affective constructs. Furthermore, integrating critical theoretical lenses such as decolonial, racial, and feminist perspectives is essential to analyze how power structures co-produce emotional experiences. Finally, applied research should focus on designing and evaluating specific institutional interventions aimed at supporting emotional place-making and resilience, thereby translating scholarly insight into tangible practice. In sum, acknowledging international student mobility as an embodied emotional journey is vital for creating more equitable, supportive, and successful global higher education landscapes.

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