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TRANSFORMATION AND INNOVATION IN THE MANAGEMENT MODEL FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS' EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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The article examines how higher education institutions can transform management models for foreign students' education in light of the growing social stratification that shapes international mobility. Drawing on a broad body of sociological and governance research, the study demonstrates that foreign students do not constitute a homogeneous policy category; rather, they form a socially layered population whose trajectories are influenced by social origin, citizenship, world-system position, and uneven access to economic, academic, and symbolic resources. The analysis identifies four structural mechanisms – resource-based filtering, institutional tracking, stratified access to support, and symbolic hierarchies – which systematically shape foreign students' opportunities and outcomes throughout their studies. The review of institutional practices shows that many existing management approaches remain “layer-blind”: universal rules, standardised procedures, and generic support structures implicitly assume equal starting conditions and therefore risk reinforcing rather than mitigating inequalities. In response, the article proposes a stratification-aware management model structured around four interconnected dimensions: access and selection, academic regulation, support and care, and participation and voice. Each dimension highlights how decisions at central, meso, and micro levels can either amplify or reduce the effects of stratification. Special attention is given to contrasting management configurations. *Selective universalism* and *compensatory add-ons* provide limited relief but leave the underlying mechanisms intact. By contrast, the configuration termed *convergence with care* combines shared academic expectations for all students with explicit recognition of unequal starting points, layered support aligned with documented barriers, and structured channels through which foreign students can articulate their experiences. The conclusion emphasises that meaningful innovation does not depend on large-scale restructuring; rather, it requires coherent adjustments in financial policies, programme architecture, support systems, and participatory arrangements. Such alignment offers higher education institutions a more realistic and just foundation for governing foreign students within an inherently stratified global system.

Keywords: foreign students, social stratification, international mobility, education management, academic regulation, student support, student participation, convergence with care.

Transformācija un inovācijas ārzemju studentu izglītības vadības modelī augstākās izglītības iestādēs

Rakstā tiek analizēts, kā augstākās izglītības iestādes var transformēt ārvalstu studentu izglītības vadības modeļus, ņemot vērā pieaugošo sociālo stratifikāciju, kas ietekmē starptautisko mobilitāti. Balstoties uz plašu socioloģisko un pārvaldības pētījumu kopumu, pētījums parāda, ka ārvalstu studenti neveido viendabīgu politikas kategoriju; drīzāk tie ir sociāli slāņota grupa, kuras trajektorijas nosaka sociālā izcelsme, pilsonība, pozīcija pasaules sistēmā un nevienlīdzīga piekļuve ekonomiskajiem, akadēmiskajiem un simboliskajiem resursiem. Analīzē identificēti četri strukturāli mehānismi — resursu filtrācija, institucionālā sadalīšana pa plūsmām, nevienmērīga piekļuve atbalstam un simboliskās hierarhijas —, kas sistemātiski veido ārvalstu studentu iespējas un studiju rezultātus. Institucionālās prakses pārskats parāda, ka daudzas esošās vadības pieejas joprojām ir “aklas” pret slāņainību: universāli noteikumi, standartizētas procedūras un vispārīgi atbalsta risinājumi netieši pieņem vienādus starta apstākļus un tādēļ riskē nevis mazināt, bet gan nostiprināt nevienlīdzību. Reaģējot uz to, rakstā piedāvāts stratifikācijai jūtīgs vadības modelis ar četrām savstarpēji saistītām dimensijām: piekļuve un atbilde, akadēmiskā regulācija, atbalsts un rūpes, kā arī līdzdalība un balss. Katra dimensija parāda, kā lēmumi centrālajā, mezo un mikro līmenī var vai nu pastiprināt, vai mazināt stratifikācijas ietekmi. Īpaša uzmanība veltīta atšķirīgām vadības konfigurācijām. Selektīvais universalisms un kompensējošie risinājumi sniedz tikai ierobežotu atvieglojumu, atstājot struktūrālos mehānismus nemainītus. Pretstatā tam konfigurācija “konverģence ar rūpēm” apvieno kopīgas akadēmiskās prasības visiem studentiem ar skaidru atšķirīgo starta pozīciju atzīšanu, daudzslāņainu atbalstu, kas pieskaņots identificētajiem šķēršļiem, un strukturētiem kanāliem, kuros ārvalstu studenti var paust savu pieredzi. Secinājumā tiek uzsvērts, ka jēgpilna inovācija neprasa plašu mēroga reformu; tā pieprasa saskaņotas izmaiņas finanšu politikā, programmu arhitektūrā, atbalsta sistēmās un līdzdalības mehānismos. Šāda saskaņa nodrošina augstākās izglītības iestādēm reālistiskāku un taisnīgāku pamatu ārvalstu studentu pārvaldībai sociāli stratificētā globālajā sistēmā.

Atslēgvārdi: ārvalstu studenti, sociālā stratifikācija, starptautiskā mobilitāte, izglītības vadība, akadēmiskā regulācija, studentu atbalsts, studentu līdzdalība, konverģence ar rūpēm.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, foreign students have become a central element of higher education systems—not only as mobile learners but also as a distinct and internally segmented social group. International student mobility has expanded in absolute numbers, yet remains highly selective. Family's social standing, cultural and educational capital, citizenship, and racialised hierarchies continue to shape who is able to study abroad, on what terms, and with what prospects (Lomer, França 2024; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Muñoz 2022). At the same time, universities increasingly rely on foreign students for demographic stability, revenue generation, and reputational gain, which turns the management of their education into a key area of institutional policy rather than a purely administrative function (Jones et al. 2020; Marginson, Rhoades 2002).

Empirical research shows that foreign students are far from a homogeneous category. Access to international programmes, scholarship schemes and high-status institutions is systematically higher for students from advantaged social backgrounds and from countries in the core of the world system, while students from peripheral or semi-peripheral contexts face more financial, academic and symbolic barriers (Muñoz 2022; Brooks 2022). Even within the same university, different segments of international students, such as scholarship holders and self-funded students or participants in elite and mass programmes, experience varying paths of integration, support, and success (Serediak, Helland 2020; Van Mol, Pérez-Encinas 2022). These findings point to social stratification as a systemic feature of foreign students' education in higher education institutions, rather than an accidental side effect (Lomer 2020; Lomer, França 2024).

However, much of institutional practice still treats international students as a single target group and relies on relatively standardised management methods. Common approaches include unified admission and orientation procedures, generic international office support and largely uniform academic requirements and quality assurance mechanisms for domestic and foreign student cohorts (Knight 2012; Liu 2025). While these instruments are important, they often fail to address the complex inequalities documented by sociological research. Support services, counselling, language assistance, and integration activities may be formally available to all, yet effectively used mostly by better-resourced or culturally similar groups, which can reinforce existing stratification patterns instead of reducing them (Lomer 2020; Shen 2020).

Recent literature on internationalisation and student well-being suggests that a different management logic is gradually taking hold. Instead of viewing foreign students primarily through the lenses of market expansion and recruitment, universities are encouraged to adopt principles of care and social responsibility that focus on vulnerability, mental health, and the uneven distribution of risks among different groups of international students (Leask, Carroll 2023; Soong, Maheepala 2023). Parallel strands in educational management research emphasise new, data-informed, and human-centred management models, including personalised learning pathways, cross-cultural mentoring, and more flexible, decentralised decision-making at programme and faculty level (Mialkovska et al. 2023). These developments open possibilities for changing the management model of foreign students' education in a way that is both organisationally innovative and sociologically grounded.

At the same time, empirical studies on the management of international students in specific national contexts indicate that universities often operate with fragmented or only partially aligned arrangements. Research from Chinese universities, for example, shows attempts to move from exceptional treatment of foreign students towards unified management, where academic standards and everyday rules are progressively brought into line with those applied to domestic students, while still recognising their specific support needs (Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025). Such experiments reveal tensions between equality and differentiation. Excessive exceptionalism can institutionalise privilege and symbolic hierarchy, whereas rigid formal equality may ignore structural disadvantages and aggravate

stratification (Nabaho 2021; Lomer, França 2024). A consistent management model must therefore combine sensitivity to social differences with clear, transparent, and fair rules for all students.

Against this background, the present article addresses the question of how higher education institutions can update and transform the management model for foreign students' education so that it responds to social stratification instead of silently upholding it. The central idea is that sociological insights into inequalities, social origin, and world-system-related stratification among international students should be integrated into the design of managerial practices, organisational structures, and support mechanisms (Mialkowska et al. 2023; Muñoz 2022; Lomer, França 2024). The study pursues three main objectives: first, to analyse sociological evidence on the stratification of foreign students as a basis for rethinking management approaches; second, to analyse contemporary leading-edge approaches to managing international students' education at the institutional level; and third, to propose an integrated, stratification-aware, and innovation-focused management model for foreign students' education in higher education institutions. Bringing together sociological perspectives on international student inequalities and management research on organisational change, the article contributes to discussions on how universities can redesign their educational management to be more socially responsive and contextually sensitive (Jones et al. 2020; Knight 2012; Leask, Carroll 2023).

Literature review

Research on internationalisation of higher education has moved from simple descriptions of mobility numbers towards analysis of how global programmes intersect with existing social hierarchies. Classic work defines internationalisation as the planned integration of international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purposes, functions, and delivery of higher education, with a clear link to political and economic contexts (Knight 2012; Marginson, Rhoades 2002). Later contributions stress that it cannot be reduced to a technical or market-oriented process and needs to be read through questions of power, inequality, and responsibility (De Wit 2020a; Jones et al. 2020; Pashby, Andreotti 2016). Within this line of research, foreign students appear as actors whose trajectories depend on structured opportunities and constraints, not as neutral “flows” of mobile learners.

Sociological studies consistently show that international student mobility is stratified by social origin, educational resources, and geopolitical position. Reviews of empirical work document that participation in study abroad and full-degree mobility concentrates among students from higher social classes, families with strong educational capital, and citizens of wealthier states (Lomer, França 2024; Almeida et al. 2025). Comparative analyses across European systems confirm that students from advantaged backgrounds are more likely to plan and complete international study even when academic achievement is held constant, while peers from lower strata face financial obstacles, weaker information channels, and less active encouragement from institutions (Mialkowska et al. 2023; Entrich et al. 2024). Approaches rooted in world-systems theory argue that internationalisation often reproduces core-periphery hierarchies: students from peripheral and semi-peripheral countries access a narrower spectrum of destinations and programmes and occupy more precarious positions in host societies (Muñoz 2022; Shen 2020).

Within host institutions, inequalities are reproduced in more fine-grained ways. Research on international students in the United Kingdom and Canada shows uneven access to high-status universities, selective programmes, and intensive support services, depending on funding status, country of origin, and language proficiency (Brooks 2022; Serediak, Helland 2020). Studies of “inclusive internationalisation” report that internationalisation-at-home-at-home activities are used more often by already privileged groups, whereas first-generation, working-class, and minority students take part less frequently even when the formal offer is open to all (Van Mol, Pérez-Encinas

2022; Ledger, Kawalilak 2022). These results justify treating foreign students as a stratified group and call into question management models that implicitly assume a homogeneous mass of “international students”.

Another set of studies focuses on the link between internationalisation, student well-being, and institutional obligations. Empirical work documents heightened levels of stress, loneliness, discrimination, and mental-health problems among international students, connected to visa rules, financial pressure, and unfamiliar academic cultures (Forbes-Mewett, McCulloch 2016; Skromanis et al. 2018; Kim 2024). During and after the COVID-19 period, additional vulnerabilities emerged around border closures, digital surveillance, and uneven access to health care, with clear differences between national and social groups of foreign students (Deuchar, Gorur 2023; Soong, Maheepala 2023). These studies show that generic “support services” are not enough: universities need arrangements that take systematic account of how risks and burdens are distributed across segments of the international student population.

Work on educational governance documents changes in how universities manage diverse student bodies. Instead of relying only on standardised, centrally designed procedures, many institutions experiment with more flexible and responsive forms of managing learning. Research from European higher education describes personalised learning pathways, modular curricula, and data-informed monitoring as responses to heterogeneous cohorts (Mialkovska et al. 2023). Studies that draw on organisational neuroscience highlight the importance of cognitive load, attention, and motivation, and argue for more decision-making at programme and teaching-team level so that management can adjust to specific student groups (Wu et al. 2022). Although foreign students are rarely the explicit focus, these contributions offer tools for thinking about management models that do not treat all learners as interchangeable.

A more focused but still limited body of work examines the management of international students’ education directly. Studies from Chinese universities discuss cross-cultural education management and argue for integrated systems that connect recruitment, curriculum, classroom interaction, and extracurricular support, guided both by host-country norms and by the heterogeneity of foreign cohorts (He 2017; Liu 2025; Zhou et al. 2023). Survey-based research on the management of international medical students identifies tensions between formally equal academic standards and unequal experiences of interaction, assessment, and feedback when language and prior schooling diverge from those of domestic students (Zhu et al. 2025). Policy discussions introduce the idea of convergence management, in which domestic and foreign students are gradually subject to similar academic and behavioural rules, with additional support targeted at empirically documented barriers instead of assumed deficits (Ye 2025). These contributions are important because they connect concrete management instruments to questions of fairness, integration, and legitimacy.

Normative writings on internationalisation bring ethics of care and social responsibility into the discussion. Authors argue that universities should treat internationalisation not only as revenue or branding, but as part of a wider commitment to global justice and sustainable development (Jones et al. 2020; Teferra 2019; Tight 2019). Integration of international students is framed in terms of reciprocity, recognition, and epistemic justice, which challenges deficit narratives and exoticising images of foreign students (Ossai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023; Pashby, Andreotti 2016). The notion of a care-oriented transformation in international education links these values to management choices and calls for institutional arrangements that place well-being, dignity, and meaningful participation of foreign students at the centre of everyday practice (Leask, Carroll 2023; Soong, Maheepala 2023).

Critical analyses of institutional strategies point to a persistent mismatch between such principles and actual governance. Internationalisation policies are often formulated at central level, while practices in programmes, classrooms, and service units develop separately, with weak coordination and limited feedback loops (Lee, Stensaker 2021; De Wit 2020b). In this situation, foreign students

may face inclusive rhetoric together with rigid procedures, or official equal treatment combined with informal hierarchies in supervision and assessment. Evidence on unequal access to support services suggests that many management tools are “layer blind”: they do not distinguish between different positions that international students occupy in social and institutional hierarchies (Serediak, Helland 2020; Lomer 2020).

Taken together, existing research reveals two disconnections. Sociological analyses of stratification among international students rarely translate their findings into detailed proposals for how management should be organised. Studies of management innovation, in turn, often pay little attention to social inequalities and world–system dynamics. Work that attempts to connect these domains tends to focus on particular aspects, such as curriculum internationalisation or mental health, rather than on the overall management model for foreign students’ education (Leask 2015; Nabaho 2021; Liu 2025). The analysis that follows brings these strands together by viewing foreign students as a socially stratified population embedded in glonacal structures of higher education (Marginson, Rhoades 2002; Lomer, França 2024) and by treating the management model of their education as a configurable set of policies, routines, and support mechanisms that can be redesigned in light of this stratification.

Research methodology

Research design. The article develops a stratification-aware management model on the basis of an analysis of results of existing empirical and conceptual studies rather than on primary fieldwork. The design combines two elements. First, it uses a focused review of sociological research on inequalities in international student mobility and in the position of foreign students within host institutions (Lomer, França 2024; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Muñoz 2022). Second, it examines studies and policy papers that deal with innovations in the management of foreign students’ education and with broader organisational changes in higher education governance (Leask, Carroll 2023; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025). On this basis, the article constructs a conceptual framework that links specific management decisions to patterns of stratification among foreign students.

The overall logic is theory-building. Sociological findings on inequalities are treated as constraints that any management model must take into account, while work on educational governance and internationalisation provides a catalogue of possible instruments and organisational arrangements (Knight 2012; Jones et al. 2020; Liu 2025). The proposed model is therefore not a description of one institution but an analytical template that can be used to assess, compare, and redesign management practices in different higher education settings.

Corpus of sources. The corpus consists of forty peer-reviewed publications and research reports published mainly between 2016 and 2025, supplemented by a small number of earlier foundational texts on internationalisation and governance (Marginson, Rhoades 2002; Knight 2012; Teichler 2017). Selection proceeded in three steps.

First, key sociological contributions on social inequalities in international student mobility and in the treatment of foreign students in host institutions were identified, using recent systematic and scoping reviews as entry points (Lomer, França 2024; Almeida et al. 2025). From these, core empirical studies were added that provide quantitative or qualitative evidence on how class, origin, funding status, and other factors shape access to mobility and experiences in host universities (Mialkovska et al. 2023; Brooks 2022; Serediak, Helland 2020; Van Mol, Pérez-Encinas 2022; Shen 2020).

Second, sources dealing with the management of international students’ education were selected. Priority was given to work that treats management as a structured set of policies and organisational practices rather than as a narrow administrative function. This group includes studies on cross-cultural

education management, convergence management, and integrated support systems in universities with sizeable foreign student populations (He 2017; Liu 2025; Zhou et al. 2023; Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025).

Third, literature on innovation in educational management and on normative frameworks for internationalisation was added, in order to capture the range of possible organisational responses. This includes research on personalised learning and data-informed governance, on organisational neuroscience in education management, and on ethics of care and social responsibility in internationalisation (Jones et al. 2020; Pashby, Andreotti 2016; Ossai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023; Leask 2015).

Analytical procedure. The analysis proceeded in three stages.

In the first stage, all sources were read with a focus on how they describe social differentiation among foreign students or among participants in internationalisation activities. Particular attention was paid to the mechanisms through which class, origin, language, funding, and programme type translate into unequal access, support, and outcomes (Lomer 2020; Entrich et al. 2024; Ledger, Kawalilak 2022). From this reading, a set of recurring stratification mechanisms was distilled, such as financial filtering, institutional tracking into different programme types, and selective access to intensive support services.

In the second stage, publications on management and governance were coded for the types of instruments and organisational logics they describe. The coding distinguished between:

- central strategic instruments (policies on internationalisation, admission rules, scholarship schemes, high-level quality assurance);
- meso-level arrangements (programme design, curriculum structures, local support units);
- micro-level practices (classroom interaction, assessment design, academic advising and mentoring) (Mialkovska et al. 2023; Wu et al. 2022; He 2017).

Within each level, cases where management practices explicitly or implicitly responded to stratification patterns were noted, for instance, targeted support for specific groups of foreign students, or convergence management that aligns standards across domestic and international cohorts (Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025).

In the third stage, insights from both strands were combined. For each stratification mechanism identified in the first stage, the analysis asked what kinds of management instruments at central, meso, and micro level could mitigate or reinforce this mechanism, drawing on the governance literature and on concrete examples from empirical studies. The glonacal agency heuristic was used as a background frame to ensure that proposed elements of the model can operate across global, national, and institutional pressures (Marginson, Rhoades 2002). The outcome of this stage is an integrated management model organised along several dimensions: access and selection, academic regulation, support and care, and participation in decision-making.

Role of illustrative cases. Although the article does not present new fieldwork, it uses selected published cases as illustrations to show how the proposed model relates to practice. Examples include convergence management reforms in Chinese universities, differentiated support schemes for international students in European and North American institutions, and attempts to embed ethics of care into internationalisation policies (Ye 2025; Deuchar, Gorur 2023; Leask, Carroll 2023; Liu 2025). These cases are not treated as representative samples but as concrete instances that make visible the links between stratification mechanisms and management choices.

Limitations. The approach has several limitations. Reliance on published studies means that the corpus is biased towards systems and institutions that are more frequently covered in English-language research, notably Europe, North America, and selected Asian countries. Practices in many other regions remain under-represented. In addition, secondary analysis does not allow for verification of how management instruments operate in everyday practice or how foreign students themselves perceive them. The model developed here should therefore be seen as a structured hypothesis about

how management and stratification are connected, which requires further testing and refinement through comparative institutional studies and primary data with foreign students and staff.

Results of the study

The analysis of the literature allows three steps. First, it shows that social stratification is a structuring principle of foreign students' education rather than a marginal issue. Second, it reveals how existing management logics intersect with, but rarely address, this stratification. Third, it leads to a stratification-aware management model with four dimensions – access and selection, academic regulation, support and care, and participation and voice – articulated across central, meso, and micro levels of governance.

Stratification mechanisms in foreign students' education. The first result concerns the main mechanisms through which stratification shapes foreign students' trajectories. Studies on mobility and international programmes consistently point to resource-based filtering: tuition fees, living costs, and proof-of-funds requirements are easier to meet for students from higher social classes, with strong educational capital and citizenship of wealthier countries (Lomer, França 2024; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Almeida et al. 2025). Even when scholarships exist, they tend to cover only a fraction of potential demand, and selection procedures often favour already advantaged profiles (Muñoz 2022; Nabaho 2021).

A second mechanism is institutional tracking into differentiated programme types and institutional segments. Foreign students are not evenly distributed across higher education systems, but are concentrated in particular institutions, fields, and fee-based tracks such as foundation programmes or parallel “international” streams (Brooks 2022; Shen 2020). These tracks are associated with different levels of prestige, resources, and labour-market opportunities, which means that institutional choice and programme type become carriers of stratification.

A third mechanism concerns stratified access to support and care. Research from Canada, the United Kingdom, and other systems shows that intensive support services, counselling, mentoring, and language assistance are used more actively by better-resourced or culturally closer groups, while more vulnerable foreign students often remain peripheral to these offers (Serediak, Helland 2020; Skromanis et al. 2018; Kim 2024). Aggregated usage statistics can therefore mask selective uptake.

A fourth mechanism relates to symbolic and epistemic positioning. Several authors describe how foreign students from particular regions or backgrounds are implicitly classified as “high-value”, “easy to supervise”, or “risky”, and how such images influence everyday flexibility in assessment, supervision, and informal rule enforcement (Muñoz 2022; Forbes-Mewett, McCulloch 2016; Ossai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023). Symbolic hierarchies thus translate into differentiated treatment, even under formally equal rules.

To make these mechanisms visible in a compact way, Table 1 summarises their main features, typical manifestations, and management implications.

Table 1 brings together the sociological side of the analysis and the management questions that follow from it. It shows that filtering, tracking, unequal access to support, and symbolic hierarchies are not abstract processes but concrete patterns that management can either ignore or address.

Overall, the literature suggests that foreign students form a socially layered group whose trajectories are shaped by these mechanisms from the moment of recruitment through everyday study and into graduation (Lomer 2020; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Muñoz 2022). Any management model that treats foreign students as a homogeneous category will therefore remain misaligned with the structure of the population it seeks to govern.

Table 1

Stratification mechanisms in foreign students' education and their management implications

Stratification mechanism	Typical manifestations in foreign students' education	Management blind spots	Key management questions
Resource-based filtering	Access to foreign programmes and full-degree mobility depends on family income, educational capital, and citizenship; self-funded students dominate in high-fee programmes; scholarships concentrate in a few “desirable” profiles.	Fee regimes and scholarship schemes are designed without a systematic assessment of how they filter out students from lower social strata or from peripheral countries.	How do admission criteria, tuition levels, and scholarships shape the social composition of foreign cohorts, and what instruments can counterbalance purely market-based selection?
Institutional tracking	Foreign students are concentrated in specific institutions, fields, and fee-based tracks (foundation programmes, parallel streams) with different prestige and resources.	Programme architecture and recruitment strategies are rarely analysed as mechanisms that channel foreign students into lower-status segments.	How can programme design limit rigid tracking into separate “international” streams and open progression routes into mainstream curricula?
Stratified access to support and care	Intensive support, mentoring, and language assistance are used mostly by better-resourced or culturally closer groups; more vulnerable students remain at the margins of services.	Support units report usage in aggregate, without asking who does not appear in their statistics and why.	How can counselling, language support, and well-being services be organised and monitored so that they reach those foreign students who face the greatest barriers?
Symbolic and epistemic positioning	Students from some regions or backgrounds are seen as “high-value” and “easy to manage”, others as risky or deficient; this shapes informal flexibility in assessment, supervision, and everyday communication.	Symbolic hierarchies are treated as individual attitudes, not as part of management; there are no structured discussions or guidelines addressing them.	How can institutions make informal expectations and symbolic hierarchies visible and incorporate them into staff development, assessment design, and codes of practice?

Source: compiled by the authors based on the analysis of results of existing empirical and conceptual studies.

Management levels and typical blind spots. The second result concerns how these stratification mechanisms intersect with existing management arrangements at different levels of governance.

At the central level, universities adopt internationalisation strategies, define admission criteria for foreign students, set tuition levels, and design scholarship schemes (Knight 2012; Jones et al. 2020). These instruments are usually formulated in general terms of merit, transparency, and competitiveness. They rarely include systematic assessment of how fee regimes and scholarship rules interact with resource-based filtering and core–periphery patterns in mobility (Lomer, França 2024; Nabaho 2021). As a result, central-level instruments may stabilise selective entry into foreign student cohorts without explicitly intending to do so.

At the meso level, faculties and programmes make decisions about curriculum structures, local admission channels, progression rules, and the design of support schemes. This is where personalised learning pathways, modular curricula, and targeted support units for international students often appear (Mialkovska et al. 2023; He 2017). These arrangements respond to heterogeneity in preparedness and

needs, but they are seldom anchored in a diagnosis of stratification. Weak links between meso-level innovation and evidence on social inequalities mean that programmes may solve visible problems on a case-by-case basis while leaving underlying patterns intact.

At the micro level, classroom practices, assessment design, academic advising, and supervision shape how formal rules are translated into everyday experience (Wu et al. 2022; Zhou et al. 2023). It is at this level that symbolic hierarchies and implicit expectations most directly affect foreign students, for instance through graded flexibility or the extent to which students feel invited to speak and ask for help (Serediak, Helland 2020; Soong, Maheepala 2023). Yet micro-level practices usually fall outside formal management models and appear mainly in staff development rhetoric rather than in structured governance discussions.

Across all three levels, a recurring blind spot emerges. Instruments are designed for abstract categories – “international students”, “at-risk students”, “high-achieving students” – without explicit reference to the stratification mechanisms identified above. This “layer blindness” leaves the interaction between management and stratification largely unexamined.

Dimensions of a stratification-aware management model. The third result is the formulation of four dimensions along which the management model for foreign students’ education can be re-designed in light of stratification. These dimensions are derived by aligning sociological findings with concrete levers of governance.

The first dimension, access and selection, concerns how admission criteria, fee policies, and scholarship design shape the social composition of foreign cohorts. Literature on mobility and social origin indicates that purely market-based selection reinforces resource-based filtering (Lomer, França 2024; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Almeida et al. 2025). A stratification-aware approach at this dimension combines merit criteria with explicit attention to social origin and geopolitical position, for example by widening scholarship eligibility to under-represented groups, diversifying partnerships beyond traditional sending countries, and monitoring who actually enters programmes rather than only total numbers (Brooks 2022; Nabaho 2021).

The second dimension, academic regulation, addresses how academic standards, assessment rules, and progression criteria are set and applied. Research on convergence management shows that aligning formal expectations for domestic and foreign students can reduce perceptions of exceptionalism, provided that structured academic support is available for those whose prior schooling differs markedly from local norms (Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025). At the same time, rigid application of uniform rules without regard to language, prior curriculum, or visa-related constraints risks deepening inequalities (He 2017; Liu 2025). The central question at this dimension is how to combine clear, transparent standards for all with non-stigmatising support that takes structural differences into account.

The third dimension, support and care, focuses on the organisation of counselling, language assistance, mentoring, and health services. Empirical studies on international students’ mental health show that risks are unevenly distributed across segments of the foreign student population (Forbes-Mewett, McCulloch 2016; Skromanis et al. 2018; Kim 2024). Normative work on ethics of care argues that support should therefore be organised as a layered system: basic services for everyone, complemented by targeted schemes for groups facing particular vulnerabilities, such as first-generation students or scholarship holders from low-income backgrounds (Leask, Carroll 2023; Jones et al. 2020; Soong, Maheepala 2023). Regular monitoring of who uses which services and who remains absent becomes part of management rather than an optional evaluation exercise.

The fourth dimension, participation and voice, asks to what extent foreign students can influence the rules and practices that govern their education. Literature on internationalisation policies in universities suggests that foreign students are often absent from formal decision-making arenas or represented mainly by relatively privileged subgroups (Lee, Stensaker 2021; Teferra 2019). Authors working with concepts of epistemic justice and decolonial perspectives argue that foreign students

hold situated knowledge about how stratification operates in everyday academic life, and that integrating this knowledge into governance is essential for more equitable models (Ossai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023; Pashby, Andreotti 2016). A stratification-aware model, therefore, treats foreign students not only as recipients of services but as contributors to institutional learning.

To show how these four dimensions operate across different levels of governance, Table 2 maps typical instruments at central, meso, and micro levels.

Table 2

Dimensions of a stratification-aware management model across levels of governance

Dimension / Level	Central level (institution-wide)	Meso level (faculties, programmes, units)	Micro level (classroom, supervision, everyday interaction)
Access and selection	Internationalisation strategy, admission criteria for foreign students, tuition policy, scholarship design, and partnerships with sending institutions.	Local recruitment channels, decisions on programme capacity, and allocation of scholarship places across programmes.	Informal signalling about “who belongs” in particular courses, encouragement or discouragement to apply for specific opportunities.
Academic regulation	General regulations on progression, grading scales, and recognition of prior learning for foreign qualifications.	Programme-level standards, assessment formats, local rules on resits, and academic support.	Concrete assessment tasks, feedback practices, flexibility in deadlines, and supervision arrangements.
Support and care	Institutional counselling strategy, funding for well-being services, formal mandate of international offices and student services.	Design and outreach of support schemes in faculties (mentoring, buddy systems, language support), coordination with central services.	Every day referrals to support, staff sensitivity to signs of distress, and peer support practices in groups and classrooms.
Participation and voice	Representation of foreign students in central committees, institutional surveys with disaggregated data.	Faculty-level consultative bodies, targeted focus groups with different segments of foreign students.	Informal channels for feedback in courses and supervision, and responsiveness to concerns raised by individual foreign students.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the analysis of results of existing empirical and conceptual studies.

Table 2 illustrates that each dimension manifests differently at each level. For example, access and selection at the central level concern tuition policies and institutional scholarship schemes, while at the micro level they appear in informal signalling by teachers about who is encouraged to apply for specific opportunities. Academic regulation ranges from general progression rules at the central level to concrete assessment tasks in individual courses. Support and care extend from the formal mandate and funding of student services to everyday referrals and peer support in classrooms. Participation and voice involve both formal representation in committees and informal channels through which foreign students can raise concerns.

Configurations of management and their implications. Bringing these elements together makes it possible to distinguish several recurring configurations of management and to assess their implications for stratification.

One configuration can be described as selective universalism. Institutions apply formally universal rules for access, standards, and support, without systematic attention to different starting positions. Fee regimes sharply distinguishing between domestic and foreign students, combined with limited needs-based scholarships and generic support services, exemplify this pattern (Lomer 2020; Nabaho 2021; Serediak, Helland 2020). Under such conditions, existing stratification acts through institutional structures largely unchecked.

A second configuration can be labelled compensatory add-ons. Here, institutions recognise that some foreign students face particular difficulties and create targeted measures such as additional language courses, special orientation events, or dedicated counselling (Liu 2025; Zhou et al. 2023). These measures alleviate individual problems but are attached to a core model that still assumes a relatively homogeneous “international student”. Support is framed as compensation for deficits rather than as a structural element of governance. The literature suggests that this configuration can improve specific trajectories but does not fundamentally alter the distribution of risks and opportunities (Serediak, Helland 2020; Soong, Maheepala 2023).

A third configuration, which appears in more recent work, can be termed convergence with care. In this case, institutions move towards shared academic expectations for domestic and foreign students, while management decisions on access, support, and participation are explicitly informed by evidence on stratification (Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025; Leask, Carroll 2023). Convergence with care does not return to exceptionalism, but it acknowledges that equal rules have unequal effects when starting points differ. It therefore couples convergence in standards with deliberate investment in layered support and with structured channels for foreign students’ voices.

The results of the analysis can therefore be summarised as follows. Social stratification structures foreign students’ education through resource-based filtering, institutional tracking, unequal access to support, and symbolic hierarchies. Existing management arrangements at central, meso, and micro levels tend to remain layer-blind and often align with either selective universalism or compensatory add-ons. A stratification-aware management model reorganises four dimensions – access and selection, academic regulation, support and care, participation and voice – in ways that can move institutional practice closer to convergence with care.

In the next section, these elements are brought together into an integrated management model, presented in Table 3, and discussed in relation to broader debates on the future of internationalisation and the transformation of management models for foreign students’ education.

Discussion

The results show that management of foreign students’ education cannot be reduced to technical coordination of recruitment, teaching, and support. Once stratification is taken seriously, management choices appear as decisions about how institutions govern a socially layered population whose access, risks, and opportunities are already unequally distributed (Lomer 2020; Lomer, França 2024; Muñoz 2022). This section discusses how the proposed model repositions the debate on international student management, what it implies for institutional practice, and how it contributes to sociological work on internationalisation.

A stratification-aware view of international student management. The central analytical move in this article is to treat stratification mechanisms as structural constraints that any credible management model must address. Resource-based filtering, institutional tracking, unequal access to support, and symbolic hierarchies are not exceptional irregularities that can be corrected through isolated measures; they are embedded features of foreign students’ educational trajectories (Mialkovska et al. 2023; Brooks 2022; Serediak, Helland 2020; Ossai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023). Accordingly, the four proposed management dimensions—access and selection, academic regulation,

support and care, and participation and voice—should not be understood as separate functional blocks but as institutional points at which stratification mechanisms are either reinforced or redirected.

To demonstrate these relationships clearly, the material is presented in Table 3, which organises stratification mechanisms, management responses, and their consequences side by side.

Table 3

Stratification-aware management model for foreign students' education

Social stratification of foreign students	Management model for foreign students' education	Outcomes for foreign students
Starting conditions	Four management dimensions	Configurations and effects
– resource-based filtering	Access and selection: admission rules; tuition and fees; scholarships and funding; recruitment partnerships	Reproduction of inequalities: selective universalism; compensatory add-ons
– institutional tracking	Academic regulation: standards and progression; recognition of prior learning; assessment regimes; allocation of students across programme types	Reproduction of stratified institutional trajectories: concentration of foreign students in lower-status tracks; limited progression into high-prestige programmes under selective universalism or fragmented compensatory schemes
– stratified access to support and care	Support and care: counselling and mentoring; language support; well-being and health services	Mitigation and partial transformation of inequalities when support is organised as layered, stratification-aware systems under convergence with care
– symbolic and epistemic positioning	Participation and voice: student feedback channels; representation in bodies; co-design of support measures; recognition of students' situated knowledge	Reproduction or transformation of symbolic hierarchies: from deficit narratives and informal exclusion under selective universalism to recognition and epistemic justice under convergence with care

Source: compiled by the authors based on the analysis of results of existing empirical and conceptual studies.

In this tabular presentation, the stratification mechanisms appear in the first column as the starting conditions shaping foreign students' entry into and movement within higher education (Lomer, França 2024; Almeida et al. 2025; Muñoz 2022). The second column lists the four management dimensions through which institutions respond to these conditions across central, meso, and micro levels of governance. The third column links these responses to typical configurations—selective universalism, compensatory add-ons, and convergence with care—each associated with distinct outcome types: the reproduction of inequalities or their partial mitigation and transformation (Nabaho 2021; Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025; Leask, Carroll 2023). Taken together, the completed outcome column makes explicit that each stratification mechanism can either reproduce layered inequalities under selective universalism and fragmentary compensatory add-ons, or contribute to their gradual transformation when institutions move towards convergence with care.

This table highlights that institutions do not choose whether they confront stratification; they choose only how they shape it through their management practices. Even formally neutral arrangements organise stratified student populations into specific constellations of opportunities and constraints. The proposed model, therefore, encourages universities to examine their current configuration not merely against abstract indicators of “internationalisation quality,” but against the

concrete consequences these configurations produce for different layers within the foreign student population.

Implications for institutional practice. For institutional actors, the model functions primarily as a diagnostic and design tool rather than as a fixed blueprint. At central level, it suggests that internationalisation strategies and financial policies should be routinely tested against questions derived from the access and selection dimension: who is filtered out by current admission, fee, and scholarship regimes, and how do these patterns map onto class and geopolitical hierarchies described in the literature (Lomer, França 2024; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Almeida et al. 2025). Such testing requires disaggregated monitoring of application and enrolment data rather than aggregate targets for the number of foreign students.

At the meso level, the model highlights the role of programme architecture and local governance in shaping institutional tracking. Faculties and departments decide whether foreign students remain in separate streams with limited progression options, or whether there are clear pathways into mainstream curricula and research-intensive environments (Brooks 2022; Shen 2020). Aligning academic regulation with stratification-aware support means, for example, designing assessment regimes that maintain common standards while integrating bridging modules and structured feedback mechanisms for students whose prior educational trajectories differ from local norms (He 2017; Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025).

At micro level, the support and care and participation, and voice dimensions point to areas that are often treated as peripheral to management. The model suggests that academic advising, classroom interaction, and informal communication are central to whether foreign students experience convergence with care or selective universalism. Staff development and course design can incorporate explicit reflection on how symbolic hierarchies and implicit expectations shape decisions about flexibility, encouragement, and recognition (Forbes-Mewett, McCulloch 2016; Soong, Maheepala 2023). In parallel, mechanisms for listening to foreign students – course-level feedback, peer-led forums, participation in committees – can be redesigned so that they reach beyond the most privileged subgroups and include voices from different layers of the foreign student body (Lee, Stensaker 2021; Ossai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023).

A practical implication is that movement towards convergence with care does not require a complete institutional overhaul, but a sequence of targeted adjustments in each dimension. For example, a university might start by revising scholarship allocation rules, then reconfiguring foundation programmes as genuine bridges rather than permanent tracks, and finally institutionalising routines for disaggregated monitoring of support-service usage. The model provides a language for linking these interventions conceptually, so that they form a coherent management trajectory rather than isolated projects.

Contribution to sociological debates on internationalisation. On the theoretical side, the model responds to an identified gap between sociological analyses of stratification and management-oriented work on internationalisation. Research on inequalities in mobility and in the positioning of foreign students has developed sophisticated accounts of how class, origin, and world-system location structure opportunities and outcomes (Lomer 2020; Lomer, França 2024; Muñoz 2022). At the same time, much of the literature on internationalisation policy and management focuses on instruments, indicators, and organisational processes without systematically integrating these stratification insights (De Wit 2020a; Jones et al. 2020).

The present model seeks to bridge this gap in two ways. First, it treats stratification mechanisms as the starting point for theorising management, rather than as a downstream effect. This shifts the analytical focus from the question “how can institutions support international students” to “how do institutions govern a stratified foreign student population and with what consequences for different layers within it”. Second, it connects normative debates on social justice, ethics of care, and epistemic

justice in internationalisation to specific levers of governance: financial policies, programme design, support structures, and participatory arrangements (Pashby, Andreotti 2016; Teferra 2019; Leask, Carroll 2023).

In doing so, the model contributes to a view of foreign students not only as recipients of support or as carriers of economic value, but as actors whose agency is shaped by, and can potentially reshape, institutional configurations. Participation and voice are not presented as optional additions to well-being policies, but as elements without which management remains poorly informed about how stratification operates in everyday academic life. This perspective aligns with calls in the literature to take the knowledge and perspectives of international students seriously in designing internationalisation strategies, rather than relying solely on managerial or policy framings (Jones et al. 2020; Ossai, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023).

Limitations and directions for further research. The model is necessarily limited by its reliance on published research from a restricted set of systems. Most of the studies it draws on concern European, North American, and selected Asian contexts, where data on international students and institutional strategies are more readily available (Lomer, França 2024; Mialkovska et al. 2023; Ye 2025; Zhu et al. 2025). Patterns of stratification and management in other regions may differ, both in their mechanisms and in the range of available policy instruments. Future work could therefore adapt and test the model in settings where foreign students occupy different positions in national higher education hierarchies or where internationalisation is less tightly coupled to revenue generation.

Moreover, the present analysis is conceptual and secondary. It reconstructs configurations of management from existing studies rather than measuring them directly. Further research could develop operational indicators for the four dimensions and three configurations, and apply them in comparative case studies of institutions that pursue different internationalisation strategies. Such work would make it possible to test empirically whether movement towards convergence with care, as defined here, is associated with measurable changes in foreign students' experiences and outcomes across different layers of the stratified population.

Despite these limitations, the model offers a way of thinking about transformation and innovation in the management of foreign students' education that keeps the sociological reality of stratification in view. It suggests that institutional innovation is not only a matter of adopting new tools or policies, but of reconfiguring how access, regulation, support, and participation are organised for a student population that is diverse and unequal at the same time.

Conclusions

The analysis in this article has started from a simple but often neglected premise: foreign students are not a homogeneous policy target, but a stratified population whose access to higher education, study conditions, and outcomes are shaped by social origin, country of residence, and position in global hierarchies. Once this premise is taken seriously, management of foreign students' education can no longer be reduced to technical coordination of recruitment, teaching, and support. It becomes a question of how institutions govern an already layered group, and whether management decisions reinforce or mitigate existing inequalities.

Building on this premise, the article has proposed a stratification-aware management model structured around four dimensions: access and selection, academic regulation, support and care, and participation and voice. These dimensions translate sociological insights into concrete levers of governance and show how stratification mechanisms such as resource-based filtering, institutional tracking, unequal access to support, and symbolic hierarchies are channelled through institutional arrangements. By locating the four dimensions across central, meso, and micro levels, the model underlines that movement towards greater equity cannot be delegated to a single office or instrument,

but requires coordinated adjustments in financial rules, programme architectures, support structures, and everyday pedagogical practices.

The typology of management configurations developed in the article further clarifies the implications of these choices. Selective universalism, where formally equal rules apply to unequally positioned students, and compensatory add-ons, where targeted support is attached to an unchanged core model, both leave the logics of stratification largely intact. The convergence with care configuration, by contrast, points towards a different trajectory. It couples shared academic expectations for domestic and foreign students with stratification-aware support and structured opportunities for foreign students to express their experience of institutional barriers and hierarchies. In this configuration, ethics of care and social responsibility become integral elements of management rather than external correctives.

For higher education institutions, the main practical implication is that transformation and innovation in the management model for foreign students' education do not depend on a single comprehensive reform. They require a sequence of informed decisions in each of the four dimensions: rethinking fee and scholarship regimes in light of who they filter out, redesigning programme structures to avoid rigid tracking, organising support and care as layered systems that reach those with the greatest barriers, and opening spaces in which foreign students can participate in the design and evaluation of institutional arrangements. Internationalisation strategies that do not take this layered reality into account remain incomplete, regardless of how ambitious their numerical targets or branding may be.

For sociological debates on internationalisation, the article suggests a way of bringing analyses of stratification and studies of educational management into closer dialogue. Instead of treating inequalities among foreign students as outcomes to be observed after the fact, the proposed model places them at the starting point of management thinking and uses them to interrogate how institutional rules and routines operate in practice. Further empirical research will be needed to operationalise the four dimensions and configurations, and to trace how different combinations of access, regulation, support, and participation shape the trajectories of specific segments of the foreign student population in diverse institutional and national contexts.

Taken together, the arguments advanced here lead to a simple conclusion. If foreign students are governed as if they formed a flat and undifferentiated category, management is likely to stabilise the very inequalities that internationalisation discourse claims to challenge. If, instead, social stratification is recognised as a central feature of foreign students' education and is built into the design of management models, higher education institutions gain a more realistic and potentially more just basis for organising the education of foreign students in a globalised system.

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