



What Drives Faculty Engagement in Higher Education Internationalization? A Systematic Review of Concepts, Predictors, Mechanisms, and Contexts

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ABSTRACT

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Faculty participation is central to higher education internationalization, yet existing research remains conceptually fragmented and theoretically contested. This study presents a systematic review of 44 empirical and conceptual studies examining faculty participation in internationalization across diverse national, institutional, and disciplinary contexts. Guided by four research questions, the review synthesizes how faculty participation has been conceptualized and measured, how institutional and individual predictors have been operationalized, which theoretical frameworks explain support–participation mechanisms, and how contextual conditions shape research findings. The review makes three theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrates that faculty participation is a multi-domain construct encompassing mobility, international research, curriculum internationalization, and composite engagement, and that measurement choices systematically shape empirical conclusions. Second, it advances an interactionist synthesis showing that institutional support is a necessary but insufficient condition, while individual motivation and accumulated academic capital operate as proximal translation mechanisms. Third, it foregrounds contextual contingency, revealing how national settings, institutional types, disciplinary cultures, and faculty identities condition engagement patterns. By linking theoretical debates to methodological practices, the review advances a conditional and relational understanding of faculty participation in internationalization.

KEYWORDS:

Faculty internationalization, Faculty engagement, Institutional support, Interaction mechanism and Systematic review

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalization has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education, shaping institutional missions, academic practices, and global knowledge production (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2011). Over the past two decades, universities worldwide have invested heavily in international strategies, including cross-border mobility, international research collaboration, curriculum internationalization, and transnational education initiatives (Altbach, 2004; Teichler, 2004). While this expansion has generated a substantial body of research on policies, institutional strategies, and student outcomes, the role of

faculty—the primary agents responsible for translating internationalization into academic practice—has received comparatively fragmented and uneven scholarly attention. A growing body of literature acknowledges that faculty participation is central to the success of higher education internationalization. Faculty members enact internationalization through research collaboration, international publishing, curriculum design, overseas teaching, and academic networking, thereby linking institutional ambitions with concrete educational and scholarly outcomes (Schwietz, 2006; Beatty, 2013; Romani-Dias et al., 2019). Empirical studies consistently show that without sustained faculty engagement, internationalization risks remaining symbolic or policy-driven rather than embedded in core academic functions (Dewey & Duff, 2009; Ryan et al., 2019). Despite this recognition, research on faculty participation remains dispersed across disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical traditions, limiting cumulative understanding.

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One challenge lies in the conceptualization and measurement of faculty participation in internationalization. Existing studies operationalize participation in diverse ways, including faculty mobility and study abroad leadership (Ndandula, 2020; Boone, 2019), international research collaboration and publication (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Huang, 2018; Gokbel, 2020), curriculum internationalization and Internationalization at Home (Sharif, 2018; Zou et al., 2019; Dinger, 2018), or composite engagement indices combining teaching, research, and service activities (Schwietz, 2006; Doyle, 2013). While this diversity reflects the multidimensional nature of internationalization, it also complicates comparison across studies and obscures whether divergent findings reflect substantive differences or measurement choices.

A second strand of research focuses on predictors of faculty participation, often distinguishing between institutional and individual factors. Institutional explanations emphasize funding availability, administrative support, policy alignment, reward systems, and organizational infrastructure (Carley et al., 2006; Doyle, 2013; Choi et al., 2014). These studies frequently document a gap between faculty members' positive attitudes toward internationalization and their limited capacity to participate due to insufficient institutional support (Ryan et al., 2019). At the individual level, motivation, international experience, language competence, and accumulated academic capital are consistently identified as key drivers of engagement (Nyangau, 2018; Yu Li, 2020; Kuzhabekova et al., 2022). Quantitative evidence suggests that faculty with prior international exposure or overseas education are more likely to engage in international research and mobility activities (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Schwietz, 2006).

However, findings across these two explanatory strands are often inconsistent or contextdependent. Some studies suggest that institutional factors exert stronger influence in resourcerich or research-intensive settings, while individual motivation dominates in contexts with weak or ambiguous incentives (Li & Tu, 2015; Xu, 2018). Others indicate that even well-designed institutional policies fail to generate participation when they are misaligned with disciplinary cultures or faculty career structures (Brinker, 2018; Dewey & Duff, 2009). These mixed results point to the limits of treating institutional and individual explanations as independent or competing.

In response, a smaller but growing body of research adopts interactionist and process-oriented perspectives to explain how institutional support is translated into faculty participation. Drawing on theories such as social exchange, structuration, sensemaking, and organizational culture, these studies emphasize mediation, moderation, and meaning-making processes (Romani-Dias & Carneiro, 2020; Xu, 2018; Brinker, 2018). For example, Li and Tu (2015) demonstrate that institutional incentives influence faculty

engagement only when internalized through individual motivation, while Romani-Dias and Carneiro (2020) highlight how faculty assess costs and benefits when deciding whether to engage in internationalization. This interactional perspective offers a promising avenue for reconciling divergent empirical findings but remains underdeveloped and unevenly synthesized across the literature.

A further complication arises from contextual contingency. Research increasingly shows that faculty participation in internationalization is shaped by national policy environments, institutional types, disciplinary cultures, and faculty identity characteristics. Comparative studies reveal distinct challenges faced by faculty in Western and non-Western contexts, particularly regarding language policies, global standards, and pedagogical diversity (Akar et al., 2020; Greek & Jonsmoen, 2020). Resource constraints in minority-serving institutions and HBCUs further limit faculty capacity for international engagement, regardless of motivation or institutional commitment (Alvira-Watson, 2019; Blake & Gasman, 2021). Faculty identity factors—such as career stage, returnee status, and disciplinary affiliation—also systematically condition engagement patterns (Yu Li, 2020; Sharif, 2018). Yet, few reviews have systematically integrated these contextual dimensions into a coherent explanatory framework.

Although several reviews have examined internationalization broadly, there remains a lack of systematic, faculty-centered syntheses that integrate conceptualization, predictors, theory, and context. Existing reviews tend to focus on specific domains, such as curriculum internationalization or mobility, or prioritize institutional strategy over faculty agency (de Wit et al., 2015; Leask, 2013). Consequently, the field lacks a consolidated understanding of how faculty participation in internationalization is defined, explained, and conditioned across contexts.

To address these gaps, the present study conducts a systematic and structured review of 44 empirical and conceptual studies on faculty participation in higher education internationalization. Rather than offering a descriptive overview, the review adopts a problem-driven and theoryoriented approach to synthesize how faculty participation has been conceptualized and measured, how institutional and individual predictors have been operationalized and supported, which theoretical frameworks dominate explanatory efforts, and how contextual factors shape research findings. By integrating evidence across diverse research traditions and settings, this review seeks to advance a more coherent and interactionist understanding of faculty participation in internationalization and to provide a foundation for future theory development and empirical inquiry. In this review, “participation” is used as an umbrella term for faculty internationalization

engagement, encompassing behavioral involvement across mobility, research, curriculum, and composite domains.

II. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL POSITIONING OF FACULTY INTERNATIONALIZATION

A. Conceptualizing Faculty Internationalization Engagement

Research on faculty internationalization consistently portrays engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing observable academic practices, underlying psychological orientations, and institutional embeddedness. At the behavioral level, engagement is commonly operationalized through faculty mobility, international research collaboration, and teaching-related internationalization practices, including curriculum internationalization and Internationalization at Home (Schwietz, 2006; Ryan et al., 2019; Ndandula, 2020). These domains capture tangible forms of participation but are not interchangeable, as faculty often engage selectively depending on disciplinary norms, career incentives, and organizational expectations (Sharif, 2018; Xu, 2018).

Beyond behavior, a substantial body of research conceptualizes faculty internationalization as a psychological orientation, emphasizing willingness, motivation, and perceived benefits. Motivation-centered studies demonstrate that engagement decisions are shaped by faculty members' assessments of professional, academic, and personal returns, such as research visibility, career advancement, and pedagogical enrichment (Li & Tu, 2015; Nyangau, 2018). However, positive attitudes and willingness do not consistently translate into actual participation, indicating that motivation alone is insufficient to explain engagement outcomes (Carley et al., 2006; Ryan et al., 2019).

A third dimension highlights the institutional embeddedness of engagement. Institutional policies, incentive structures, organizational climate, and leadership priorities shape the conditions under which faculty participation becomes feasible or constrained (Doyle, 2013; Choi et al., 2014). Empirical studies repeatedly document misalignment between institutional rhetoric and operational support, resulting in uneven or symbolic engagement despite formal commitment to internationalization (Dewey & Duff, 2009; Alvira-Watson, 2019). Taken together, the literature suggests that faculty internationalization engagement is best understood as a behavioral–psychological–institutional configuration, rather than a single measurable outcome.

B. Major Theoretical Lenses

Theoretical approaches to faculty internationalization can be broadly grouped into institutional, individual, and interaction-oriented perspectives, each foregrounding distinct explanatory mechanism.

Institutional-oriented frameworks emphasize organizational support, policy environments, and structural conditions as primary drivers of engagement (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2002). From this view, faculty participation reflects institutional priorities, resource allocation, and governance arrangements (Doyle, 2013). While these models highlight the importance of enabling structures, they tend to overpredict engagement in contexts where support exists but faculty participation remains limited (Dewey & Duff, 2009).

Individual-oriented perspectives draw on motivation theory, self-determination theory, and human capital approaches, emphasizing intrinsic motivation, career incentives, international experience, and accumulated academic capital (Li & Tu, 2015; Nyangau, 2018). Quantitative studies consistently show that faculty with overseas education or prior international exposure demonstrate higher levels of international engagement (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Yu Li, 2020). However, these approaches often understate institutional constraints and contextual inequalities shaping access to international opportunities (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2020).

Interaction-oriented perspectives seek to reconcile these explanations by focusing on translation mechanisms between institutional conditions and faculty behavior. Herzberg's Dual-Factor Theory distinguishes between hygiene factors (e.g., institutional support) and motivators (e.g., professional growth), suggesting that support is necessary but not sufficient for engagement (Herzberg et al., 1959; Cranwell, 2020). Social Exchange Theory conceptualizes engagement as a cost–benefit assessment shaped by reciprocal expectations between faculty and institutions (Romani-Dias & Carneiro, 2020). Structuration and sensemaking perspectives further emphasize how faculty interpret institutional signals through organizational culture and professional identity (Xu, 2018; Brinker, 2018).

C. Conceptual Tensions and Analytical Propositions

Despite theoretical diversity, the literature remains marked by several unresolved tensions.

First, debate persists over whether institutional factors necessarily outweigh individual factors. While some studies emphasize the primacy of institutional support, others demonstrate stronger effects for individual motivation and academic capital, particularly in resource-constrained contexts (Li & Tu, 2015; Xu, 2018).

Second, the relative importance of incentives versus constraints remains contested. Motivation-centered research highlights intrinsic rewards, whereas organizational analyses emphasize structural constraints—such as workload, evaluation systems, and political barriers—that limit participation regardless of motivation (Nyangau, 2018; Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2018).

Third, there is ongoing debate regarding whether overseas educational background constitutes a structural advantage.

Evidence suggests that returnee faculty often exhibit higher international engagement (Yu Li, 2020), yet qualitative studies caution that such advantages are mediated by institutional context and disciplinary hierarchies (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2020).

Drawing on these tensions, this review is guided by the following analytical propositions:

P1. Institutional support functions as a necessary but insufficient condition for faculty internationalization engagement.

P2. Individual motivation and accumulated academic capital operate as proximal mechanisms translating institutional conditions into engagement.

P3. Interactional processes—such as mediation by motivation and moderation by context—explain divergent engagement outcomes under similar institutional conditions.

P4. Overseas educational background enhances faculty internationalization engagement, but its effects are conditional on institutional and disciplinary context.

III. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research on internationalization in higher education has expanded rapidly over the past two decades; however, faculty participation—the primary mechanism through which internationalization is enacted—remains insufficiently synthesized. Existing studies have examined faculty internationalization from diverse perspectives, including mobility, international research collaboration, curriculum internationalization, and general engagement. Yet, this literature is characterized by conceptual inconsistency, fragmented explanatory frameworks, and strong contextual contingency, which together limit cumulative knowledge building and practical guidance.

First, prior studies vary substantially in how faculty internationalization “participation” is defined and measured, ranging from mobility-based indicators and international research outputs to pedagogical practices and composite engagement scales. These divergent operationalizations complicate cross-study comparison and obscure whether inconsistent findings reflect substantive differences or measurement choices. Second, although both institutional factors (e.g., policy support, funding, reward systems) and individual factors (e.g., motivation, attitudes, international experience) are frequently identified as key predictors, studies differ in how these factors are operationalized and in the consistency of empirical support they provide.

Second, the field draws on a wide but weakly integrated set of theoretical frameworks, including internationalization models, motivation and exchange theories, human capital perspectives, and organizational or interactionist approaches. While each offers partial explanations, there remains limited clarity regarding how institutional support is translated into faculty participation, or why similar institutional conditions produce divergent outcomes. Finally, accumulating evidence

suggests that context matters: national policy environments, institutional types, disciplinary cultures, and faculty identity characteristics shape both opportunities for and patterns of engagement. However, few reviews have systematically synthesized these contextual effects.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study is to conduct a systematic and structured review of research on faculty participation in higher education internationalization. Rather than offering a descriptive summary, the review aims to map and integrate how faculty participation has been conceptualized and measured, how institutional and individual predictors have been operationalized and supported, which theoretical frameworks dominate explanatory efforts, and how contextual factors condition empirical findings.

Accordingly, this review addresses the following research questions:

RQ1 examines how faculty internationalization “engagement” has been conceptualized and measured;

RQ2 compares the operationalization and empirical consistency of institutional and individual predictors;

RQ3 identifies the theoretical frameworks used to explain support–participation mechanisms;

RQ4 explores how contextual factors—such as national setting, institutional type, discipline, and faculty identity—shape research findings.

By addressing these questions, this review seeks to clarify sources of convergence and divergence in the literature and to provide a more coherent foundation for theory development and future empirical research on faculty internationalization.

IV. METHOD

A. Literature Search Strategy

A systematic search of peer-reviewed literature was conducted using ProQuest One Education, which is widely recognized as core databases for international higher education research. We entered the search term “faculty engagement in internationalization” and its various variants into all search fields (including title, abstract, keywords, and full text) in the ProQuest One Education, limiting the publication year to between 2006 and 2025, which yielded a total of 5,711 records. At the abstract stage, we reviewed all sources to determine if the report was empirical and theoretical studies addressing faculty roles in internationalization; major reasons for exclusion at this stage were that retrieved articles were publications in Non-English-language or internationalization engagement research that were clearly outside the scope of higher education, and focus on non-faculty members. This process resulted in 101 full-text articles that we downloaded for full-text review. Studies were included if they met three criteria: (1) the primary unit of analysis was faculty members or academic staff in higher education;

- (2) the study explicitly addressed faculty participation, engagement, motivation, attitudes, or practices related to internationalization, including mobility, international research, curriculum internationalization (IoC), or Internationalization at Home (IaH);
- (3) the research employed empirical methods (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) or constituted a theoretically grounded conceptual analysis with clear relevance to faculty internationalization mechanisms.

From this full-text sample, we further excluded reports because they were later identified as (1) focused exclusively on students, (2) institutional rankings without faculty-level analysis, (3) macro-level policy discourse lacking empirical or conceptual engagement with faculty role. We then conducted forward and backward searches of the included studies. This resulted in a final sample of 44 included reports. See study search strategy flow diagram for the report identification process and reasons for exclusion (Fig. 1).

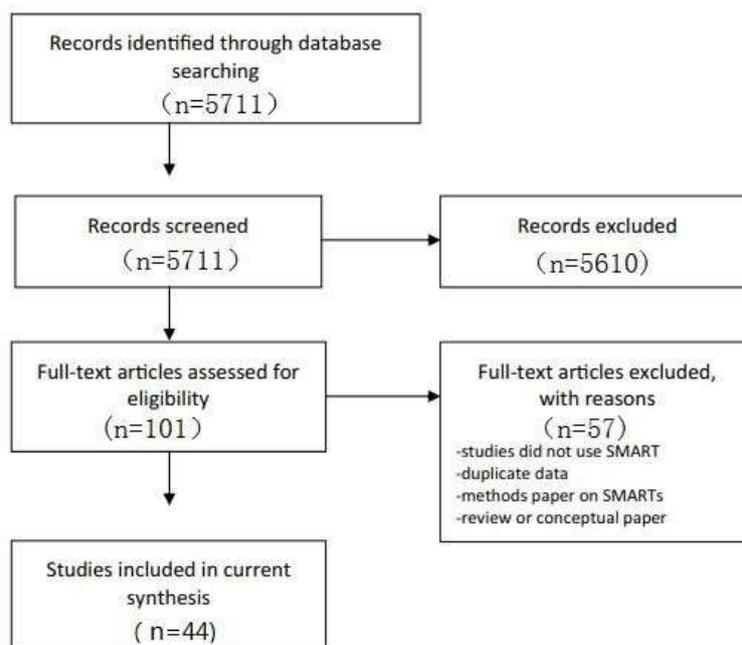


Fig. 1 Search strategy flow diagram

B. Analytical Framework and Coding Procedures

An iterative analytical framework was developed to ensure systematic alignment between the reviewed literature and the four research questions. Each study was coded across four interrelated dimensions corresponding to engagement conceptualization, predictor operationalization, theoretical explanation, and contextual conditioning.

To address RQ1, studies were first categorized according to their dominant conceptualization and measurement of faculty internationalization engagement. Four engagement domains were identified: (1) mobility-oriented engagement, focusing on cross-border movement and faculty-led international programs; (2) research-oriented engagement, operationalized through international collaboration, co-authorship, and publication dissemination; (3) curriculum-oriented engagement, including Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) and Internationalization at Home (IaH) practices; and (4) general or composite engagement, measured via survey-based involvement scales or multi-domain participation indices. This domain-based classification enabled systematic comparison of measurement strategies and highlighted how

different operational definitions shape empirical conclusions.

To examine explanatory factors in relation to RQ2, predictors were coded into two focal categories aligned with the review's comparative synthesis: institutional factors (e.g., funding, policy support, organizational infrastructure, leadership commitment, and reward systems) and individual factors (e.g., motivation, attitudes, self-efficacy, international experience, language competence, and career orientation). In addition, two ancillary codes were applied to preserve conceptual coverage without conflating levels of explanation: contextual constraints, capturing macro- and meso-level boundary conditions such as geopolitical restrictions, visa regimes, and regulatory environments; and interaction mechanisms, capturing studies that explicitly theorized or tested mediation, moderation, or structure-agency dynamics linking support to participation. These ancillary codes were retained to support synthesis for RQ3 (interaction mechanisms) and RQ4 (contextual constraints), while keeping the RQ2 comparison focused on institutional versus individual predictors.

To address RQ3, each study was further coded according to its primary theoretical lens. Theories were grouped into four families: motivation and exchange theories (e.g., Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and motivational systems); human capital and mobility-based frameworks, including transnational human capital and accumulated advantage; organizational and interactionist perspectives, such as structuration theory, sensemaking, and organizational culture models; and internationalization-specific frameworks, including Knight's internationalization cycle, de Wit's process framework, and Childress's Five I's. This classification enabled evaluation of how different theoretical traditions conceptualize the support-participation mechanism and where theoretical integration remains limited.

Finally, to capture contextual contingency in line with RQ4, studies were coded for national or regional setting, institutional type (e.g., research-intensive universities, regional institutions, and minority-serving institutions), disciplinary focus, and faculty identity characteristics (e.g., career stage, returnee status, and language background). This contextual coding facilitated cross-context comparison and identification of patterns that vary systematically by setting or group.

C. Data Synthesis Strategy

Following coding, findings were synthesized using a thematic aggregation approach. Evidence was integrated across studies within each analytical dimension rather than summarized individually. Quantitative and qualitative findings were treated as complementary: quantitative studies contributed breadth and pattern identification, while qualitative studies provided depth in explaining mechanisms and contextual nuance. This synthesis strategy allowed identification of robust trends as well as areas of divergence shaped by engagement domain, methodological design, or context.

D. Methodological Considerations and Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, restricting the review to English-language publications may have excluded relevant regional scholarship. Second, heterogeneity in conceptual definitions and measurement instruments limits direct comparability across studies. Third, as the review synthesizes published research, it may be subject to publication bias favoring significant findings. Despite these limitations, the systematic coding and structured synthesis enhance transparency and analytical rigor.

V. RESULTS

A. Geographic, Institutional, and Disciplinary Distribution of Studies

Across the reviewed literature, faculty internationalization engagement has been examined in a wide range of national

and institutional contexts, including the United States (e.g., Beatty, 2013; Doyle, 2013; Cranwell, 2020), China and Brazil using cross-national datasets (Huang, 2018; Gokbel, 2020), emerging and transitional systems such as Turkey (Akar et al., 2020), Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova et al., 2022), and the Philippines (Mananay et al., 2024), as well as geopolitically constrained settings such as Iran (Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2018). This distribution highlights two field-level patterns. First, the evidence base is heavily shaped by national policy environments and resource conditions, which influences both the feasibility of international engagement and the forms it takes (e.g., mobility vs. curriculum internationalization). Second, several studies demonstrate that disciplinary cultures condition how faculty define and enact internationalization, particularly in curriculum-related work, where "hard" disciplines more often perceive content as universal and thus show weaker perceived need for internationalization than "soft" disciplines (Sharif, 2018; Ryan et al., 2019). STEM-focused analyses further suggest that faculty in technically oriented disciplines often construe internationalization primarily through research collaboration rather than comprehensive institutional models (Cranwell, 2020), reinforcing the importance of disciplinary differentiation in synthesizing findings.

B. Conceptualization and Measurement of Faculty Internationalization Engagement

The reviewed studies reveal substantial heterogeneity in how "faculty internationalization engagement" is conceptualized and operationalized. Four dominant measurement traditions are evident. First, a mobility-oriented tradition treats international engagement as cross-border movement and participation in overseas academic activities, including faculty-led short-term programs and exchanges (Ndandula, 2020; Boone, 2019; Dias et al., 2020). Second, a research internationalization tradition operationalizes engagement through international collaboration, coauthorship, and publication dissemination, often linking these behaviors to research productivity (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Huang, 2018; Gokbel, 2020; Romani-Dias et al., 2019). Third, an Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) and Internationalization at Home (IaH) tradition emphasizes pedagogical and curricular practices, showing that faculty engagement ranges from superficial content "international relevance" to deeper identity- and citizenship-oriented learning goals (Zou et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2019; Dinger, 2018; Fochier, 2020). Fourth, a general engagement tradition uses composite indicators or survey-based involvement scales across teaching, research, and service, frequently paired with attitudinal measures (Schwietz, 2006; Carley et al., 2006; Doyle, 2013).

This conceptual diversity has two implications for synthesis. On the one hand, it indicates that internationalization is not a single behavior but a portfolio of practices embedded in

different institutional functions. On the other hand, it limits direct comparability across studies, because predictors that strongly explain research-focused engagement may not predict IoC practices with the same magnitude or direction. As a result, the literature often accumulates evidence in parallel streams rather than building a unified explanatory model.

Taken together, these four measurement traditions indicate that faculty participation is operationalized as domain-specific behaviors and/or composite involvement indices, making cross-study comparison contingent on engagement-domain specification (RQ1).

C. Institutional Support, Reward Systems, and Organizational Infrastructure

A central and consistent finding across contexts is that perceived institutional support— particularly resources, funding, administrative facilitation, and reward-system alignment— shapes the likelihood and intensity of faculty engagement. Large survey-based studies commonly show that faculty hold generally favorable attitudes toward internationalization while simultaneously reporting insufficient institutional support, especially regarding funding, workload recognition, and promotion/tenure incentives (Carley et al., 2006; Doyle, 2013; Choi et al., 2014). Case studies similarly document a mismatch between program-level enthusiasm and weak organizational coordination or unclear institutional strategy, which undermines sustainable faculty participation (Dewey & Duff, 2009). In curriculum internationalization research, institutional misalignment is frequently manifested as low faculty awareness of institutional IoC goals and limited professional development opportunities, leading to early-stage or uneven implementation (Sharif, 2018; Ryan et al., 2019).

Importantly, evidence from under-resourced and equity-focused contexts indicates that institutional constraints are not merely perceived barriers but structural conditions that shape internationalization capacity. Studies focusing on minority-serving and resource-constrained institutions highlight that limited administrative capacity, financial disparities, and ambiguous strategic vision restrict the institutionalization of internationalization, thereby placing a disproportionate burden on individual faculty agency (Alvira-Watson, 2019; Blake & Gasman, 2021). Conceptual work on faculty development further suggests that effective support must integrate instrumental resources (funding, training) with recognition and policy alignment, including attention to inequities experienced by women, minorities, LGBTQ faculty, and disabled faculty (Witkowsky & Gibbes, 2020). Taken together, the evidence indicates that institutional support operates through both material mechanisms (resources, infrastructure) and symbolic mechanisms (recognition, career rewards), and that both are

necessary to move from attitudinal endorsement to sustained engagement.

D. Individual Motivation, Attitudes, and Perceived Benefits as Proximal Drivers

While institutional conditions are consistently relevant, many studies show that the translation of institutional opportunities into actual engagement depends on individual-level motivational and cognitive mechanisms. Motivation-focused qualitative studies repeatedly find that intrinsic motivations—such as commitment to student global learning, social mission, personal fulfillment, and academic identity—often outweigh external incentives, particularly when institutional rewards are limited or ambiguous (Nyangau, 2018; Beatty, 2013). Studies grounded in motivational systems and self-efficacy frameworks similarly suggest that faculty engage in internationalization through a combination of intrinsic drivers (meaning, competence development) and extrinsic goals (career advancement, recognition), with self-efficacy and perceived competence functioning as key enabling conditions (Gas-ib & Sannadan, 2023). Quantitative modeling in the Chinese context provides further evidence that individual motivation can mediate the effect of environmental motivation, implying that institutional incentives must be internalized to become behaviorally effective (Li & Tu, 2015).

Attitudinal orientation also emerges as an important correlate of participation. Survey studies consistently report that faculty with more favorable attitudes toward internationalization and stronger perceived benefits show higher engagement in international activities, particularly when supported by prior international experience (Schwietz, 2006; Carley et al., 2006; Doyle, 2013). However, the curriculum internationalization literature adds nuance by showing that positive attitudes do not automatically translate into IoC practice, because faculty may lack a clear conceptual understanding of IoC, feel unprepared for culturally diverse teaching, or experience competing workload demands (Ryan et al., 2019; Fochier, 2020). Thus, individual attitudes appear to be necessary but insufficient predictors, operating most effectively when paired with competence development and institutional scaffolding.

E. International Experience, Returnee Advantage, Language Competence, and Academic Capital

Prior international experience is among the most robust correlates of faculty internationalization engagement across the reviewed literature. Multiple survey-based studies demonstrate that faculty who have participated in international travel, collaborations, or overseas academic activities report higher levels of international involvement, suggesting that experience functions as both a capability (skills, networks) and a motivational reinforcement (identity and confidence) (Schwietz, 2006; Doyle, 2013; Finkelstein et al., 2013). Cross-national and comparative analyses based

on the CAP dataset further indicate that international dissemination and collaboration relate to higher research productivity, though the strength of these relationships varies across national systems, disciplines, and institutional types (Huang, 2018; Gokbel, 2020). Importantly, evidence from China highlights the comparative advantage of returnee faculty, who demonstrate stronger international publication output, more globalized teaching orientations, and more frequent overseas engagement than locally trained peers, implying that transnational human capital and accumulated advantage mechanisms may amplify institutional internationalization (Yu Li, 2020).

Language competence and linguistic environment also shape engagement, particularly in nonAnglophone or multilingual settings. Evidence from Kazakhstan indicates that English proficiency is positively associated with favorable internationalization attitudes, while broader involvement in policymaking remains limited (Kuzhabekova et al., 2022). Qualitative work on transnational mobility in Norway shows that language practices influence informal interaction, collaboration, and inclusion, revealing how linguistic hierarchies can create uneven integration and workload distribution within departments (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2020). These studies collectively suggest that international experience and language competence operate as forms of academic capital that condition access to international networks, legitimacy in global academic spaces, and the capacity to participate effectively.

Synthesizing Sections 5.3–5.5, the cross-study pattern is most consistent for prior international experience and accumulated academic capital, whereas institutional support exhibits greater variability in its observed association with participation across operational definitions and institutional settings (RQ2).

F. External Constraints, Geopolitics, and Contextual Contingency

Beyond institutional and individual factors, some studies highlight the decisive role of external constraints, especially in geopolitically constrained environments. In the Iranian context, political tensions, international sanctions, and visa restrictions are identified as major external barriers that shape faculty international interactions alongside institutional and individual constraints (Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2018). This evidence underscores that faculty participation is not solely determined within universities but is embedded within macro-level political and regulatory conditions that can sharply limit mobility, collaboration opportunities, and access to global academic resources.

Comparative research further demonstrates that faculty experiences of internationalization challenges vary systematically across cultural and national contexts. For example, cross-national comparisons between the United States and Turkey show divergent perceived challenges: U.S.

faculty emphasize culturally diverse teaching demands, whereas Turkish faculty emphasize pressures related to aligning global standards and English-medium instruction (Akar et al., 2020). These findings reinforce the importance of contextualizing “barriers” and “supports” rather than treating them as universally equivalent constructs.

Taken together, contextual conditioning operates at four levels: national policy and geopolitics (e.g., sanctions/visa regimes), institutional type and resourcing (e.g., MSIs/HBCUs), disciplinary cultures (hard vs. soft fields), and identity-linked capital such as returnee status and language competence (RQ4).

G. Theoretical Lenses and Explanatory Mechanisms of Faculty Internationalization Engagement

To address RQ3, the reviewed literature draws on a diverse but unevenly integrated set of theoretical frameworks to explain how institutional conditions are translated into faculty internationalization engagement. Four dominant families of theories can be identified, each foregrounding different explanatory mechanisms.

First, internationalization-specific frameworks conceptualize faculty participation as part of broader institutional processes. Models such as Knight’s internationalization cycle and de Wit’s process-oriented framework emphasize the integration of international dimensions into teaching, research, and service, positioning faculty as key implementers of institutional strategy (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2002). While these frameworks provide macro-level structure, empirical studies show that they often under-specify micro-level mechanisms explaining why faculty engagement varies under similar institutional conditions (Dewey & Duff, 2009; Doyle, 2013).

Second, motivation and exchange-based theories focus on individual decision-making processes. Social Exchange Theory conceptualizes faculty engagement as a cost–benefit assessment shaped by reciprocal expectations between faculty and institutions, highlighting how perceived rewards, recognition, and support influence participation decisions (Romani-Dias & Carneiro, 2020). Motivation-centered approaches, including self-determination and motivational systems theory, further emphasize intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and perceived benefits as proximal drivers of engagement, particularly when formal incentives are weak or ambiguous (Li & Tu, 2015; Nyangau, 2018). These theories offer strong explanatory power for faculty agency but tend to treat institutional context as background rather than as an interactive force.

Third, human capital and mobility-based perspectives explain engagement through accumulated academic capital derived from international education, collaboration, language competence, and network embeddedness. Large-scale quantitative studies demonstrate that international experience and overseas education are among the most

consistent predictors of international research collaboration and publication, though their effects vary by national system and discipline (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Huang, 2018; Gokbel, 2020; Yu Li, 2020). These approaches effectively account for persistent engagement differences but risk naturalizing inequality by underplaying structural barriers to capital accumulation.

Finally, organizational and interactionist perspectives explicitly address the translation gap between institutional support and faculty behavior. Herzberg's Dual-Factor Theory distinguishes between hygiene factors (e.g., institutional support, infrastructure) and motivators (e.g., professional growth), suggesting that support is necessary but insufficient for engagement (Herzberg et al., 1959; Cranwell, 2020). Structuration and sensemaking approaches further emphasize how faculty interpret institutional signals through disciplinary norms, organizational culture, and professional identity, leading to divergent engagement outcomes under similar policy environments (Xu, 2018; Brinker, 2018).

Taken together, the reviewed studies suggest that no single theoretical framework sufficiently explains faculty internationalization engagement. Explanatory strength emerges when institutional conditions, individual motivation, and accumulated academic capital are examined as interacting mechanisms rather than as independent predictors. Consistent with the coding scheme, interaction is primarily evidenced in this corpus through mechanism-oriented theorizing rather than direct statistical tests; accordingly, interactional evidence is synthesized here via theoretical lenses (RQ3) and then evaluated against prevailing design limitations in the Discussion (Section 7.4).

VI. METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY AND RESEARCH DESIGN LIMITATIONS

Across the reviewed literature, several methodological limitations systematically constrain the cumulative understanding of faculty participation in higher education internationalization. First, cross-sectional research designs dominate the field. Most quantitative studies rely on single-wave survey data to examine relationships among institutional support, individual characteristics, and internationalization engagement (e.g., Schwietz, 2006; Doyle, 2013; Li & Tu, 2015; Kuzhabekova et al., 2022). While effective for identifying correlational patterns, such designs limit causal inference and obscure the temporal dynamics through which engagement develops over time. Second, the literature shows a heavy reliance on self-reported measures, particularly for engagement, motivation, perceived benefits, and institutional support. Although self-report instruments capture faculty perceptions and sensemaking processes, they are susceptible to social desirability bias and common method variance. This limitation is especially evident in curriculum internationalization research, where positive attitudes

frequently coexist with limited implementation (Ryan et al., 2019; Fochier, 2020).

Third, despite frequent theoretical references to interaction mechanisms, empirical tests of mediation, moderation, and longitudinal effects remain scarce. Only a small number of studies explicitly model how individual motivation mediates institutional incentives (Li & Tu, 2015) or how context conditions engagement outcomes. As a result, much of the literature remains descriptive rather than mechanism-oriented.

Finally, institutional variables are inconsistently operationalized. Institutional support is variously defined as funding, policy rhetoric, leadership commitment, reward systems, or organizational climate (Carley et al., 2006; Doyle, 2013; Choi et al., 2014), limiting cross-study comparability and contributing to mixed empirical conclusions.

Taken together, these methodological patterns underscore the need for more diversified research designs and clearer alignment between theory, measurement, and analytical strategy.

VII. DISCUSSION

A. Reassessing How Faculty Participation in Internationalization Is Conceptualized

This review demonstrates that faculty participation in internationalization has been conceptualized and operationalized in markedly heterogeneous ways, which has significantly shaped empirical conclusions across studies. Participation has been variously defined in terms of physical mobility, international research collaboration, curriculum internationalization, and composite engagement across teaching, research, and service (Schwietz, 2006; Doyle, 2013; Ryan et al., 2019). While this diversity reflects the multidimensional nature of internationalization, it also limits cross-study comparability and contributes to inconsistent findings. For example, predictors that strongly explain international research collaboration may have limited explanatory power for curriculum internationalization practices, which are often embedded in disciplinary norms and pedagogical beliefs (Zou et al., 2019; Sharif, 2018).

The evidence further suggests that mobility-based and research-oriented operationalizations tend to privilege faculty with existing international capital, such as overseas training, strong language proficiency, or access to global research networks (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Yu Li, 2020). In contrast, curriculum-oriented conceptualizations highlight cognitive and interpretive dimensions of engagement, revealing substantial variation in how faculty understand their roles in internationalization (Ryan et al., 2019; Dinger, 2018). These findings indicate that participation is not a single construct but a family of related practices, and future research would benefit from clearer differentiation among engagement domains rather than relying on aggregated or

ambiguous measures. This conceptual divergence directly answers RQ1 by showing that “participation” is measured through domain-specific practices rather than a single, interchangeable outcome.

B. Institutional Support as a Necessary but Methodologically Overstated Condition

Across national and institutional contexts, institutional support consistently emerges as a necessary enabling condition for faculty participation in internationalization. Numerous studies report that faculty generally endorse internationalization in principle while perceiving insufficient support in practice, particularly with regard to funding, workload recognition, promotion and tenure incentives, and administrative coordination (Carley et al., 2006; Doyle, 2013; Choi et al., 2014). Case studies further show that even where internationalization initiatives exist at the program or departmental level, weak organizational alignment and fragmented infrastructure undermine sustained faculty engagement (Dewey & Duff, 2009). The institutional-side evidence indicates that support functions primarily as an enabling condition rather than a direct driver of participation, and that its observed association with faculty engagement varies substantially with how “support” is operationalized (e.g., funding, workload recognition, reward systems) and with the institutional and national contexts in which it is examined.

However, the prominence of institutional explanations in the literature must be interpreted in light of prevailing methodological choices. Much of the evidence linking institutional support to participation is derived from cross-sectional, self-reported survey designs, which tend to capture faculty perceptions of support rather than its actual behavioral effects. As a result, institutional support is often treated as a direct predictor of engagement, even though such designs are ill-suited to determining whether support precedes participation or is retrospectively reinterpreted through engagement experiences.

Evidence from resource-constrained and equity-focused contexts further illustrates the conditional nature of institutional effects. In minority-serving institutions and HBCUs, structural limitations—rather than faculty resistance—often constrain internationalization capacity despite strong normative commitment (Alvira-Watson, 2019; Blake & Gasman, 2021). In geopolitically constrained environments, external political and visa barriers directly limit participation regardless of institutional intent (Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2018). Taken together, these findings suggest that institutional support functions less as a deterministic driver than as a contextual condition, whose effects depend on faculty capacity, interpretation, and opportunity structures—relationships that are rarely captured in dominant research designs. In synthesis, institutional support is best read as a variable enabling

condition whose apparent contribution to participation is highly sensitive to how support is specified (resources, rewards, coordination) and to the organizational and policy environments in which it operates.

C. Individual Motivation and Academic Capital as Proximal but Context-Bound Mechanisms

At the individual level, motivation, international experience, language competence, and accumulated academic capital function as proximal mechanisms shaping faculty participation. Qualitative studies consistently demonstrate that intrinsic motivations—such as commitment to student global learning, professional identity development, and personal fulfillment—often outweigh extrinsic rewards, particularly in environments where institutional incentives are weak or ambiguous (Nyangau, 2018; Beatty, 2013). These findings align with motivational and self-determination perspectives, which emphasize internalized goals and self-efficacy as key drivers of sustained engagement (Li & Tu, 2015). Across studies, individual-level evidence is comparatively more consistent for prior international experience and accumulated academic capital, whereas motivation operates as a proximal translation mechanism whose effects are contingent on institutional opportunity structures and structural constraints.

Quantitative evidence further indicates that prior international experience is among the most consistent correlates of engagement. Faculty with overseas education, international collaboration experience, or strong language competence are significantly more likely to engage in international research and dissemination (Schwietz, 2006; Finkelstein et al., 2013; Yu Li, 2020). Notably, this pattern appears more robust across national and institutional contexts than institutional support alone, suggesting that academic capital operates as a relatively stable enabling mechanism.

Yet, the apparent strength of individual-level explanations is also shaped by methodological bias. Heavy reliance on self-reported motivation and attitude measures may amplify the explanatory salience of individual agency while underestimating structural constraints that are less visible to respondents. Moreover, individual agency alone is insufficient to overcome persistent barriers in under-resourced institutions or linguistically stratified academic environments (Greek & Jonsmoen, 2020). These findings underscore that individual motivation and capital are necessary but not autonomous drivers, operating most effectively when institutional and external conditions are supportive. In synthesis, individual-side evidence is comparatively more robust for prior international experience and accumulated academic capital, whereas motivation functions more variably as a proximal translation mechanism that becomes consequential primarily when opportunity structures and constraints permit enactment.

D. Interactional Mechanisms: Explaining Divergent Findings Through Methodological Gaps

A central contribution of this review lies in identifying interactional mechanisms as the most theoretically promising yet empirically under-tested explanation for divergent findings in the literature. While many studies invoke interactionist frameworks—such as social exchange theory, Herzberg’s dual-factor theory, structuration, and sensemaking—few employ research designs capable of directly testing mediation or moderation processes (Li & Tu, 2015; Xu, 2018; Brinker, 2018). In doing so, it answers RQ3 by showing that interactionist theories are most informative when they specify translation mechanisms (mediation/moderation) rather than parallel predictors.

The dominance of cross-sectional designs limits the field’s ability to examine how institutional support is internalized, resisted, or transformed by faculty over time. As a result, institutional and individual factors are frequently treated as parallel predictors rather than as interdependent mechanisms, reinforcing unresolved debates over whether structure or agency “matters more.” Where mediation is explicitly modeled, evidence suggests that institutional incentives influence engagement primarily through motivational internalization, rather than through direct effects (Li & Tu, 2015).

Organizational culture and sensemaking research further demonstrates that faculty responses to internationalization initiatives depend on how institutional signals are interpreted within disciplinary and cultural contexts (Brinker, 2018; Gong, 2019). These findings help explain why similar policies can yield high engagement in some settings and minimal participation in others. Importantly, they also highlight how methodological limitations—rather than theoretical inadequacy—have constrained empirical validation of interactionist explanations. Advancing this line of inquiry therefore requires research designs that explicitly align analytical strategy with interaction-oriented theory.

E. Contextual Contingency: Why “What Works” Depends on Where and for Whom

The review underscores that faculty participation in internationalization is highly context-dependent. Cross-national comparisons reveal that faculty in different regions face distinct challenges, ranging from pedagogical diversity and inclusion in Western contexts to pressures related to global standards and English-medium instruction in non-Western systems (Akar et al., 2020). Institutional type also matters: research-intensive universities, regional institutions, and minority-serving institutions exhibit different capacity constraints and incentive structures, shaping both opportunities and participation patterns (Alvira-Watson, 2019; Blake & Gasman, 2021). This directly answers RQ4 by demonstrating that “what works” for participation is

systematically conditioned by national setting, institutional capacity, disciplinary culture, and identity-linked resources. Disciplinary cultures further mediate engagement, particularly in curriculum internationalization, where faculty in “hard” disciplines may perceive less need for internationalization than those in “soft” or applied fields (Sharif, 2018; Ryan et al., 2019). Faculty identity characteristics—including career stage, returnee status, and language background—also shape participation, highlighting the need for differentiated and context-sensitive internationalization strategies rather than uniform institutional approaches (Yu Li, 2020; Kuzhabekova et al., 2022).

F. Toward an Integrative Framework of Faculty Participation in Internationalization

Synthesizing the evidence, this review supports a conditional and relational model of faculty participation in internationalization. Institutional structures provide necessary resources and symbolic signals; individual motivation and academic capital activate these opportunities; and interactional processes determine how support is translated into concrete engagement. This integrative perspective reconciles institutional, individual, and interactional explanations and clarifies why empirical findings vary across contexts and engagement domains.

By foregrounding interaction mechanisms and contextual contingency, the review advances a more coherent theoretical foundation for future research and underscores the importance of designing internationalization policies that are both faculty-centered and contextually responsive. Future studies would benefit from explicitly testing mediation and moderation models, employing longitudinal designs, and differentiating among engagement domains to enhance theoretical precision and cumulative knowledge building.

From a methodological perspective, this integrative framework also clarifies why fragmented and sometimes contradictory findings persist in the literature: dominant cross-sectional and self-reported designs are poorly suited to capturing interactional and temporal mechanisms, underscoring the need for longitudinal and mixed-method approaches in future research.

G. Implications for Future Research Design

Future research on faculty internationalization engagement would benefit from designs that more directly align methodological strategies with interaction-oriented theoretical claims. First, longitudinal and multi-wave designs are essential for capturing engagement as a developmental process shaped by changing institutional conditions, career stages, and accumulated international experience. Such designs would enable stronger causal inference regarding whether institutional support precedes engagement or emerges in response to it.

Second, researchers should pursue greater methodological triangulation. Combining self-reported survey data with administrative records (e.g., mobility participation, publication databases), curriculum artifacts, or observational data would enhance validity and reduce reliance on perceptual measures alone. Mixed-method designs are particularly well suited to linking quantitative patterns with qualitative explanations of meaning-making and identity.

Third, future studies should more systematically test mediation and moderation mechanisms. Modeling motivation, self-efficacy, or academic capital as mediators—and institutional type, discipline, or national context as moderators—would allow empirical evaluation of interactionist theories that currently remain largely conceptual.

Finally, progress toward cumulative knowledge requires clearer conceptual alignment and more consistent operationalization of institutional variables. Developing theory-driven measurement frameworks that distinguish among material support, symbolic recognition, and policy alignment would enhance comparability across studies and strengthen theory testing.

By addressing these design challenges, future research can move beyond fragmented correlational evidence toward more robust, mechanism-based explanations of how faculty engage in internationalization across diverse contexts.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesized research on faculty participation in higher education internationalization, a field that has expanded rapidly but remains theoretically fragmented and methodologically uneven. Drawing on 44 empirical and conceptual studies across diverse national, institutional, and disciplinary contexts, the review examined how faculty participation has been conceptualized and measured, how institutional and individual predictors have been operationalized, which theoretical frameworks have been used to explain engagement, and how contextual conditions shape empirical findings. By explicitly linking theoretical debates to prevailing methodological patterns, the review advances a more integrated and conditional understanding of faculty participation in internationalization. The first theoretical contribution lies in reconceptualizing faculty internationalization participation as a multi-domain construct rather than a unitary outcome. The synthesis demonstrates that engagement has been variously operationalized through mobility, international research collaboration, curriculum internationalization, and composite engagement indices (Schwietz, 2006; Ryan et al., 2019). Importantly, the review shows that these conceptual differences are not merely semantic but are methodologically consequential: cross-sectional and domain-specific measures systematically privilege different forms of capital and agency. Mobility- and research-oriented operationalizations

tend to foreground faculty with pre-existing international academic capital, whereas curriculum-focused studies reveal interpretive, pedagogical, and disciplinary dimensions of engagement that are less visible in survey-based indicators (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Zou et al., 2019). By clarifying how measurement choices shape theoretical conclusions, this review provides a foundation for more precise, domainsensitive theorization and cumulative comparison.

The second contribution advances an interactionist synthesis that reconciles institutional and individual explanations while accounting for their apparent empirical inconsistency. Across contexts, institutional support—such as funding, policy frameworks, reward systems, and administrative infrastructure—emerges as a necessary enabling condition but rarely as a sufficient driver of faculty participation (Carley et al., 2006; Doyle, 2013). At the same time, individual motivation, international experience, language competence, and accumulated academic capital consistently function as proximal mechanisms shaping engagement (Nyangau, 2018; Yu Li, 2020). Rather than treating these explanations as competing, the review demonstrates that their relationship is conditional and mediated. Crucially, many unresolved debates regarding whether institutional or individual factors “matter more” can be traced to methodological limitations—particularly the dominance of cross-sectional, self-reported designs that are ill-suited to testing mediation, moderation, and temporal processes (Li & Tu, 2015; Xu, 2018). By foregrounding interactional mechanisms, this review reframes theoretical disagreement as a methodological challenge and advances a relational understanding of how support is translated into participation. The third contribution lies in theorizing contextual contingency as a core explanatory dimension rather than a peripheral modifier. The evidence demonstrates that national policy environments, institutional types, disciplinary cultures, and faculty identity characteristics systematically condition engagement patterns (Akar et al., 2020; Kuzhabekova et al., 2022). Resource constraints in minority-serving institutions, geopolitical barriers, and linguistic stratification illustrate that faculty participation is embedded within broader structural conditions that extend beyond individual institutions (Alvira-Watson, 2019; Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2018). Methodologically, these contextual effects are often acknowledged descriptively but rarely modeled explicitly, contributing to fragmented and sometimes contradictory findings. By synthesizing these contingencies across studies, the review moves beyond universalistic claims and clarifies why similar internationalization initiatives yield divergent outcomes across settings.

Taken together, this review advances faculty internationalization research from a collection of parallel findings toward a more integrated explanatory framework grounded in methodological reflexivity. By differentiating engagement domains, reconciling institutional and

individual explanations through interactional mechanisms, and foregrounding contextual contingency, the study provides a clearer theoretical foundation for cumulative knowledge building. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and multi-wave designs, explicit testing of mediation and moderation processes, and theory-driven, domain-specific measurement strategies. Conceptualizing faculty participation as a relational and contextually embedded process is essential for advancing both theory and practice in higher education internationalization.

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